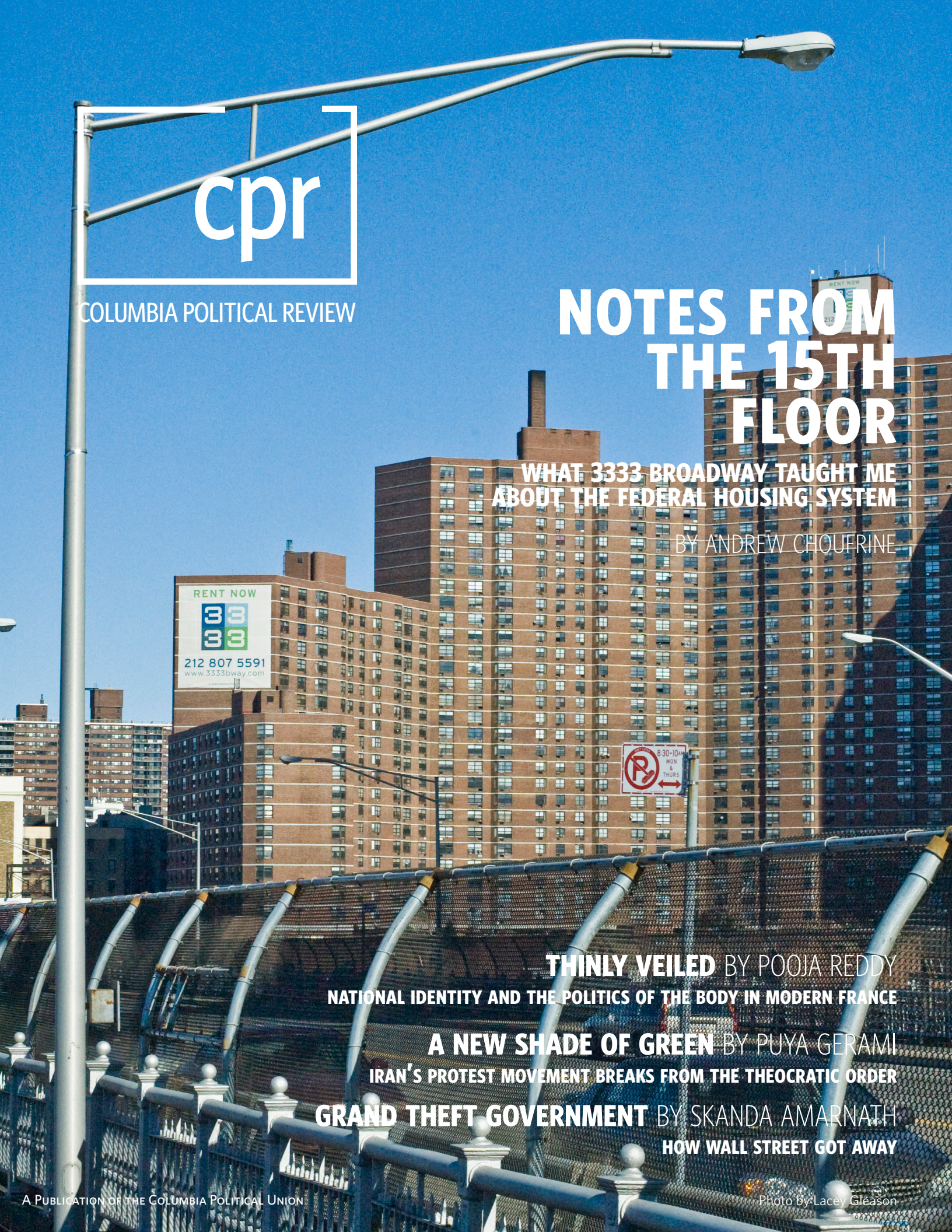

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COLUMBIA POLITICAL REVIEW

NOTES FROM THE 15TH FLOOR

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A Publication of the Columbia Political Union

Photo by Lacey Gleason

cpr VOLUME IX, NO. 3

Editor's Note

By some divine coincidence, we've all somehow landed ourselves here in Morningside Heights together. Each of us, once belonging to vastly different worlds, has come to inhabit the same space just a few weeks ago hurling snowballs at each other and now sharing the same anxieties about midterms. But sometimes even the best of friends forget that, even though we share many of the same concerns and inside jokes in the present, every one of us brings our own bizarre pasts to this equally bizarre institution called college. In the pluralistic society in which we live, we remember always to tread cautiously, using politically sensitive language towards others and generally playing nice. But rarely do we attempt to understand each other's individual pasts in their gritty detail—and that's not even to speak of our own.

In our cover story (p. 7), Andrew Choufrine explores his unusual personal history and attempts to do the one thing that we all struggle to do ourselves—map a genealogy of our political beliefs. Andrew, a beneficiary of housing subsidies as a child, finds himself opposing the very policy that has helped him become the privileged Columbia student he is today. He tries to reconcile these two truths the best he can.

As we reflect back, each of us, like Andrew, will find that our personal trajectories do not follow a comprehensible path. Still, we attempt—a bit pathetically, and maybe a bit valiantly—to connect the dots so that we might make sense of ourselves. In some respects, attempting to construct a neat, narrative arc to our personal myth is possibly just another form of intellectual masturbation, but I wonder if it might serve some purpose other than to indulge our narcissism. Maybe trying to understand ourselves endows us with the ability to defend the beliefs we hold so dear, knowing that we aren't perfect.

CATHERINE CHONG

Letter to the Editor

To the editor:

Kassandra Lee ("Africa Disempowe(RED)," Dec. 2009) deserves credit for noting the strange, cynical place where gross American consumerism and vague feel-goody humanitarianism collide. Yes, there's something paternalistic (i.e. racist) about the (RED) campaign's formulaic, simplistic advertising (Africa=AIDS, "Africa is sexy," etc.). What a pathetic case of the white man's burden, indeed, when the burden only consists of choosing a red iPod instead of a white one.

But all of these bogus ideas about Africa and AIDS propagated by Gap Co. are refracted images of bogus ideas held by lots of Americans. Gap is trying to move units of cheap shirts, and the weird reality is that the best way to do that is by chastising the consumer for his wealth and materialism and then offering an "alternative" product he can purchase as a way of repenting and resolving his bourgeois guilt. Corporations like Gap, Starbucks (think fair trade), and Toyota (think Prius) have shrewdly, cynically absorbed all of the criticisms of American consumerism (it's bad for the third world, it's bad for the environment) into their business model by designing products that American consumers can buy to express their discontentment. Occasionally, amazingly, this kind of fake anti-consumerism sales pitch results in measurable positive change: the Prius, in particular, has been wildly profitable for Toyota, wildly gratifying to the consciences of millions of liberal drivers, and—here's the kicker—arguably beneficial in terms of reducing carbon emissions. Yeah, it's kind of a sad, ironic progressiveness, but I think it's the best we can hope for.

Paul Rodgers, CC 2010

Photo by Tacey Gleason

MARCH.2010

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HARRY REID UNPLUGGED

By Nina Pedrad

It was morning in America—and Harry Reid was already having a bad day. Below is a day in the mind of the Senate Majority Leader.

4:30AM: Loud knocking on my door. Go away, Kool-Aid Man.
4:33AM: Still knocking. Not a dream?
4:34AM: "What?" I say, peering through the front door peep hole. Jim Manley, my Communications Director, is clenching his jaw.

"Did I do something to offend you? Did we have a fight?" he asks.

He can be a bit dramatic.

Jim continues. "No? Then please tell me how the hell you managed to insult the Supreme Court, Native Americans, and the State of Tennessee, all at once, while speaking to a group of kindergartners."
4:55AM: Jim keeps hurling words like "re-election" and "superbly racist" at me.
6:00AM: Staffers are swarming around my house. One of them looks fat. Wait—she's pregnant.
6:06AM: Still though, on the fatter side of pregnant.
6:10AM: The place looks like Hurricane Katrina swept through.
6:11AM: Is it too soon to reference Hurricane Katrina?
6:12AM: No, I remember some rapper did it.
6:30AM: Missing morning yoga to issue an apology. Jim and his apologies. I could do without them.
6:33AM: Called George Bush's dog fat once. Never apologized. Never will.
6:40AM: My hip flexors feel unnaturally stiff. Maybe between interviews I can do a Warrior Series?
6:45AM: Put black lycra yoga pants in my briefcase. Here's hoping.
7:00AM: A text from Chris! "Tough break on SCNAT-Gate. Psyched for brownies!" Oh no. It's my turn to bring snacks to the caucus. I completely forgot. Well, this is just perfect. Now I have to bring store-bought baked goods. I hate store-bought baked goods. They taste like plastic.
7:01AM: I don't trust plastic.
7:02AM: I bet in China, everything's plastic.
8:10AM: Just reached the Hill. Time to take charge.
8:11AM: "What are you doing?" Jim looks nervous.

"Don't worry about it," I say, turning to the reporters. They're buzzing around Hart like a bunch of flies.
8:12AM: "Hey, reporters! I am not your dead animal carcass so please leave me alone!"
8:13AM: Did Jim just whimper? Oh, no, he's crying.
8:16AM: The Hart security guard is whistling something familiar. I can't place it. "Three's Company?"
9:45AM: The office is boring. Everyone's freaking out about SCNAT. No one wants to just hang.
11:30AM: Walking to Dodd's office to play Wii.
11:31AM: "HARRY!" That damn wobbly screech stops me mid stride.
11:32AM: Nancy's neck vein is twitching out of control. She's got that crazy look in her crazy eyes again and she's pointing to a *Politico* article.
11:33AM: "You've done it this time." She always talks to me like a child, even though we're the same age. She's just had her face upholstered.

"Dead carcass?—are you even aware that you're up for re-election?"

I spot the outline of her old eyebrows. Yahtzee.
11:34AM: She's now whisper-yelling into my ear. "The only thing more utterly absurd than your carcass line is SCNAT-Gate. You just urinated on your campaign with that one. Tell me, how did you manage to insult three totally different groups simultaneously?"

I don't have to answer to you, decrepit wench.

She just grabbed ahold of my man bits.

"I told them a story about Andrew Jackson!"
11:35AM: The beast releases me from her lifeless, wrinkly tentacles. Sweet freedom.

Her eyes fall to my briefcase. "Nice yoga pants."

That's it. "DANG IT NANCY! SCREW YOU TO HECK!"
12:45PM: To be fair, I wouldn't have said that had I known four reporters were around the corner. On the bright side, our little tiff is fast making Supreme-Court-Native-American-Tennessee-Gate old news.
1:21PM: Was that guard whistling "Brown-Eyed Girl?"
2:00PM: Getting ready to go on national television to apologize to the single human being I hate most. I can practically hear Mitch McConnell giggling.
2:04PM: They put too much foundation on my face. Feels itchy.
2:07PM: Having an allergic reaction to the make-up. On in five.

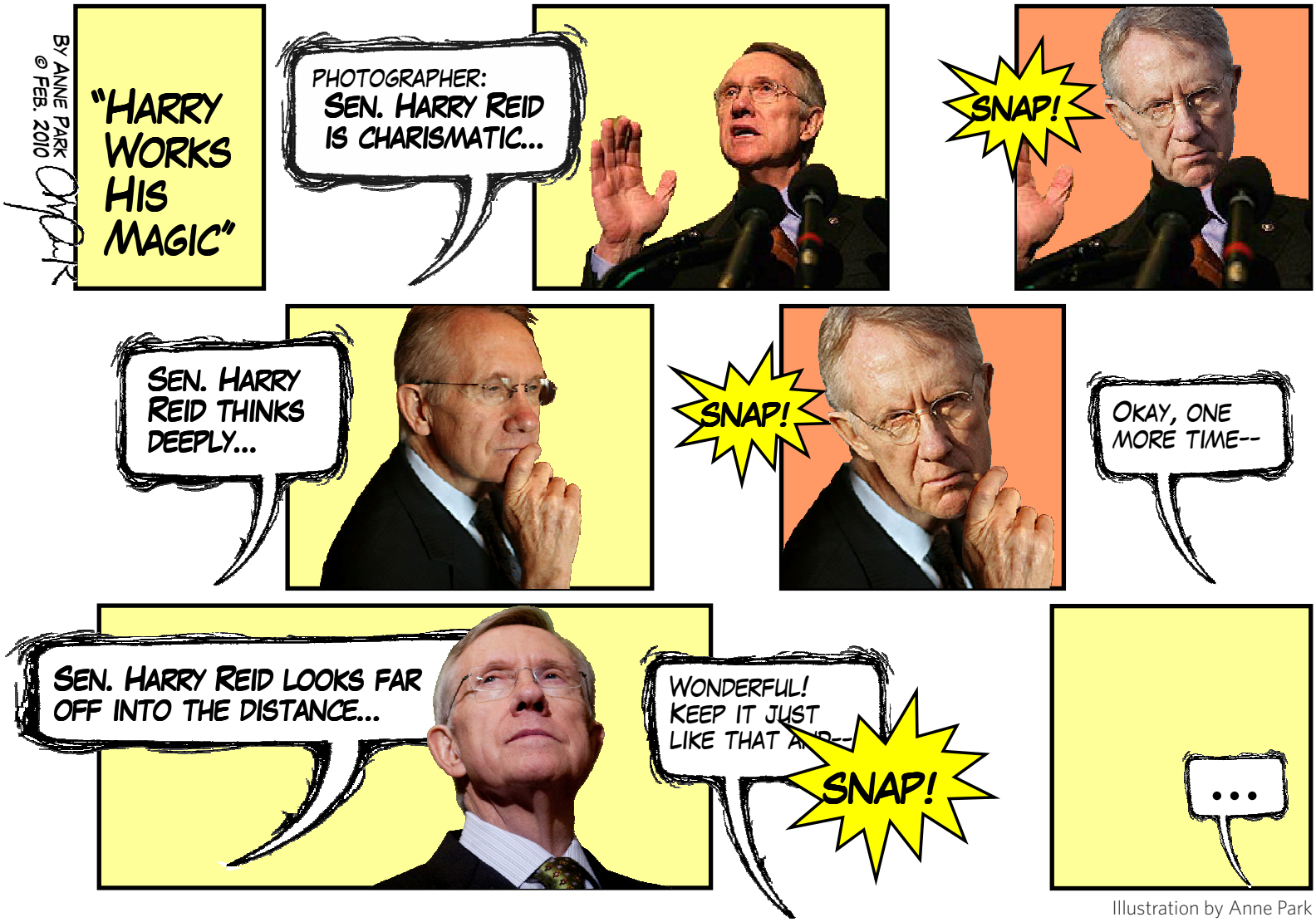

Illustration by Anne Park

2:30PM: The National Organization of Women just retracted their support for my re-election.
2:38PM: Jim wants me to take a candid picture with Landra in the feminine hygeine section of CVS to get back the female vote. Told him I'm spooked by tampons.
2:39PM: I'd pose in front of make-up counter, I guess. Nothing too queer, though. Neutrogena?
2:47PM: Jim has ordered me to stay in the office until the caucus. So that's where I am.
2:48PM: Playing "Snood" on my computer.
2:49PM: Maybe it was "My Kind of Town."
2:50PM: No, it wasn't that.
2:54PM: Just found three musical edits of me cursing out Nancy on YouTube.
2:56PM: Just found one that splices me telling off Nancy with me telling off the reporters.
2:58PM: Just found the Charley video. That kid is adorable, there's no two ways about it.
3:05PM: Stomach growling.
3:11PM: Can't figure out how to look up restaurants that deliver on my BlackBerry.
3:12PM: Taping the track ball on my BlackBerry back into place.
3:13PM: I broke my BlackBerry.
3:17PM: Still hungry.
3:20PM: Maybe it was "Hungry Like Wolf?"
3:21PM: But why would anyone hum that?
3:22PM: It wasn't that. Still hungry.
3:23PM: The brownies don't look so bad.
3:25PM: "Harry, what the hell are you doing?"
3:26PM: Explaining to Jim that I was hungry. Which is why I was licking the plate of brownies.
9:15PM: Sleepy sleep sleep.
9:18PM: My eyes feel like silly putty.
9:24PM: Something's beeping.
9:26PM: Where am I?
9:27PM: What?
9:28PM: Where's my underwear?
9:29PM: Flowers... wristband... muted tones...
9:30PM: Hospital!
9:32PM: ...Why am I in a hospital?!
9:39PM: Nurse said I got food poisoning from brownies. Missed the caucus. Have three texts from Chris. "Dude, where r u?," "Brownies?" and "DUDE."
9:44PM: This whole ordeal only confirms my suspicions that the brownies were made, at least partially, from plastic.
10:06PM: Another text from Chris: "Get well buddy. *Mad Men* later?"
10:09PM: That's what the guard was singing! The theme song from *Mad Men*.
10:28PM: Warrior One pose. I can feel my hip joints opening up already.

Nina Pedrad, CC '11, is double concentrating in History and Political Science. She likes tea but fears the Party. She can be reached at np2303@columbia.edu.

SPORCLE EXPOSED

By Dan D'Addario

It's on roughly a third of all laptops in any given lecture hall, and one of your suitemates is, I guarantee, playing it right now. A Columbia student recently featured on the *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* website revealed to the *Spec* his study habits: "I just did a lot of Sporcle and hoped for the best." Welcome to the world that Sporcle has created. The website contains hundreds of quizzes on topics ranging from movies to history—anyone who seeks to prove that they know every Sandra Bullock film ever made, or every British prime minister, is invited to see how smart they really are. It certainly beats my old way of keeping myself awake during class—scribbling down Academy Awards Best Picture winners in the margins of my notebook.

Sporcle is our everything! Game show preparation, time killer, custodian of Sandra Bullock ephemera. And it's all in good fun, right? You'd think so—all the quizzes on the site's main page are innocuous enough. But venture a bit further into the site's nether regions to find a politically backward underworld. "User-created games" all bear the disclaimer "Quiz has not been verified by Sporcle"—and, um, it's good that they haven't been! Sporcle couldn't possibly keep its sterling reputation as a place to develop one's mind if it explicitly endorsed the kind of thinking its quizzes engender. Take the quiz called "HDI: Best and Worst Countries to Live In?"—if you've ever looked at a map of Europe, I promise you'll do great! Eleven out of the 15 "best" countries are located in Europe while (surprise!) 14 out of 15 of the "worst" countries are in Africa. So, I guess life in Africa must really suck. You could say, "It's just the worst." At least the quizzes on Sandra Bullock movies don't impart a value judgment (and that quiz might actually need one).

The first type of quiz is implicitly racist or just kind of weird-feeling. The quiz, "The World's Most Beautiful Cities According to *Forbes*," outsources the burden of authoritatively declaring the global South ugly to a listicle in a financial magazine (the hints provided are the names of the continent each city is located on—five in Europe, four in North America, and only Cape Town appears to represent South America or Africa). Does such a bagatelle really belong on a site whose geographic quizzes generally deal with the capital cities of the world and the like? You're using the same brain muscles you would use to list the cities of North America, except this time to list which cities are "beautiful." Same with "Most and Least Corrupt Countries." "Least corrupt" might as well be called "Europe, the U.S., and Japan" while the "most corrupt" is made up of guess which continent? Sporcle, having primed its users to name the countries of Africa in the "Countries of Africa" quiz, is now roping together an entire continent's discrete problems into an amalgam of value judgments of the place as "bad" or "ugly." Taking a Sporcle quiz might seem like an educational alternative to a Facebook study break, but before you pat yourself on the back, ask yourself what it's trying to teach you.

Illustration by Elizabeth Simins

The other sort of quiz is usually, to use a word so common in the Internet era, random. I may not know much about the Maldives, but thanks to Sporcle's straightforward geographical quizzes, I know it exists, and thanks to its user-generated quizzes, I know it has a high percentage of female prisoners—at least according to "aneki.com." Ah, the Maldives: home of bad, bad ladies and, apparently, little else.

The random quizzes get even less innocuous. Little more need be said but this title: "Can you name the countries by stereotype?" Okay, just a couple more things need be said! Clues include "Poor, tacos, moustaches, gardeners, lazy." The U.S. stereotype is "Boastful, fat, loud, fastfood, opinion about everything." An opinion about everything... sounds about right for Sporcle, and for the nation of web-surfers whom it's telling what to think.

Daniel D'Addario, CC '10, is a double major in American studies and English, alternating the job search with heavy internet use. He can be reached at dpd2104@columbia.edu.

NOTES FROM THE 15TH FLOOR

What 3333 Broadway taught me about the federal housing system

By Andrew Choufrine

Photo by Lacey Gleason

When I moved to New York City last year to attend Columbia University, I knew that finding housing would be a challenge; after three weeks of frustration, I finally managed to find an acceptable studio apartment one mile north of campus. What I didn't know was that the apartment was available because the previous tenant had recently leapt to his death out of the 15th-story window. That element of surrealism would foreshadow some of my sociological experiences in the new building.

Photo by Lacey Gleason

I live in 3333 Broadway, a massive, 1,193-apartment building towering over the Manhattanville/Hamilton Heights neighborhood of West Harlem. It comprises its own U.S. census tract with over 4,000 residents, and the neighborhood—bustling, safe, and convenient to transportation—is booming; in the last two weeks, a Dunkin Donuts, a supermarket and a deli have sprung up within a two-block radius.

Affordability, however, is a challenge, as in most places in Manhattan. I am putting myself through school with a job and $45,000 per year in loans, with well over half of my living expenses represented by my rent—$1,190/month. When I learned that many, but not all, of my neighbors have half or more of their rent paid by government subsidies, I was struck by the parallels with the neighborhood that I grew up in.

I emigrated from Russia with my family in 1994 in search of the promise of opportunity in America. And America delivered—I grew up in beautiful and affluent Princeton, New Jersey, due to a stroke of luck: we secured a spot in heavily-subsidized housing development. We had a two-bedroom townhouse in a safe and beautiful neighborhood, just a mile from a neighborhood with home prices averaging $800,000. The total rent was a steal at approximately $650/month.

Growing up, I always viewed the federal subsidies as a springboard to lift my family out of poverty, and felt a responsibility to strive to improve my situation. However, at 3333 Broadway, I found another environment entirely. In West Harlem, living on federal subsidies is not a means to betterment but rather a culture that feeds on itself.

This made me curious—as someone who tends to drift between classical and modern political liberalism—about the justice and efficacy of the extensive housing subsidies available throughout United States, the sort that I had richly benefited from but now found myself reexamining with new critical eyes.

I am who I am because I grew up in Princeton. As much as I try, it is almost impossible to imagine what I might have become were it not for subsidies—to evaluate fairness from a hypothetical position where I am blind to my own status and background, through what the philosopher John Rawls described as a "veil of ignorance."

Not only is it difficult to see the world but through our own biased perspective,


Photo by Benjamin Fogarty

Photo by Benjamin Fogarty


Photo by Benjamin Fogarty

Photo by Lacey Gleason


Photo by Ravi Bhalla


Photo by Ravi Bhalla

Attendees of a Major Tenants' Meeting on February 4

the fact that subsidies secured life-long advantages for me and helped me attain educational and career goals make me an exception, not the rule. This was something I realized only after moving to New York: 38 percent of my neighbors live not only under the poverty line, according to the United States census, but in a vastly different economic reality than I had grown up knowing in Princeton.

A HISTORY OF GOOD INTENTIONS

When 3333 Broadway—which was formerly called the Riverside Park Community—was built in 1975, it stood as one of the largest residential buildings in the United States. The building was incorporated into the Mitchell-Lama Housing Program, a utopian 1955 scheme, named after two members of the legislature, which gave tax abatements, cheap land and low-interest, government-subsidized mortgages to developers to build low-income housing. It was supposed to alleviate a housing shortage and providing middle-class families with a temporary leg up.

When the building was removed from the program—an action allowable under the agreement—after 20 years and the prepayment of the balance of the mortgage, many tenants faced significant rent increases. Political pressure from people "losing their homes" succeeded in securing a response. A compromise was reached between the government, tenants, and landlord; tenants received Section 8 "Enhanced" Vouchers—a special category of subsidies specially distributed to make up for the removal of the Mitchell-Lama restrictions and named after the section of the U.S. Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 where the program was originally authorized.

With these vouchers, tenants pay either their prior subsidized rent or 30% of their income; the vouchers—financed by the federal government—pay the rest directly to the landlord, even as rents go up (which cannot happen unless the landlord justifies the increase to the Department of Housing and Urban Development). Significantly, the vouchers do not expire, continuing to pay out every month so long as the tenant stays in their apartment.

An estimated three-quarters of 3333 Broadway's population is comprised of Section 8 tenants, and this is not likely to change soon because of the enduring nature of the assistance, despite the fact that one of the objectives of the original law was "the reduction of the isolation of income groups within communities."

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES, UNEQUAL RESULTS

The distribution of housing subsidies does not seem to correspond with any real economic criteria, but is rather scattershot and dependent on luck. For example, while I have no significant assets and am on par or below my neighbors in terms of

economic status, I have no access to this housing assistance because of the convoluted and unequal way these benefits are distributed. The cashier I chatted with at a deli on my block commutes over an hour each way to work, earning $28,000 year. He had looked at 3333 Broadway, but was unable to afford the $1,700 / month rent for a 1-bedroom apartment. There were no more Section 8 Enhanced vouchers available.

This constantly-shifting patchwork of inconsistent funding policies contributes to tension at 3333 Broadway, which tends to come out at tenants' meetings. An organized tenants' association, call the New Concerned Tenants Union Association of 3333, has held meetings and rallies against market rents, submetering (the practice of charging tenants for individual utility usage), inadequate repairs, and discrimination against subsidized tenants. They are also often assisted by legal aid and tenants' rights societies, which seek to help them take legal and financial action against the landlord and educate them about the best way to maintain or receive government assistance.

The Tenants' Association is led by Alicia Barksdale, 49, an energetic paralegal and college student who has lived in the Riverside Park Community for more than three decades and faithfully represents the interests of her constituents. She is also a community liaison for New York City Councilman Robert Jackson, who represents the area. "It's obvious that the landlord wants Section 8 tenants out, so that they can do what they want with the building; they do more for market-rate tenants than for people who have been here for years," she said. "There are issues with repairs, rodents, bed bugs, and heat." Ms. Barksdale also agrees, however, that it's not fair for people to be charged vastly different rents for similar apartments; "the entire building should be placed back into Mitchell-Lama," she added.

A primary issue here seems to be the concept that being compelled by economic circumstances to move is an unfair situation where the economy must be steadied by the government. So, policies buffer citizens from the vagaries of the market that may lead to relocation. The

"It's obvious that the landlord wants Section 8 tenants out, so that they can do what they want with the building; they do more for market-rate tenants than for people who have been here for years"

Photo by Lacey Gleason

average American moves every five years, and some would say that this is not an issue of basic fairness. Ms. Barksdale, however, disagrees: "when you've lived somewhere for years, you become rooted and active in your community. It's not fair to have to move because the rent goes up," she said.

THE LANDLORD

The primary target of Ms. Barksdale's grievances is Urban American Management Corp., a West New York, NJ-based firm that purchased the building for $280 million. The deal was completed in 2007, two years after the previous owner removed the complex from the Mitchell-Lama program. "When a tenant moves out, which happens for a wide variety of reasons, we improve the apartment and charge what the market will bear," Mr. Eisenberg said. "People choose to pay it because they like the area and want a nice place to live. In fact, the building is better off now than it was when we bought it. We've put millions of dollars into repairs and improvements."

Douglas Eisenberg, Chief Operating Officer of Urban American, explained that his company treats all tenants equally, and there is no reason to treat Section 8 tenants any differently. A Section 8 voucher is not available to someone like me because the program was a special measure for people who were already living in the building when it was taken out of the Mitchell-Lama program.

Mr. Eisenberg also explained that although Urban American helps tenants deal with the appropriate authorities to maintain their vouchers, it has nothing to do with the subsidy, which is a product of the relationship between the tenant and the City. "The only situations in which a tenant may lose their voucher due to maintenance or repair related issues is if a city inspection finds problems in the apartment and the tenant does not permit access for repairs to be made or for the reinspection of completed repairs," he added.

Max Hartman, like Mr. Eisenberg, is continuing in his family business. He is a landlord who manages two 20-unit buildings one block north of 3333 Broadway and has encountered problems with the system of housing subsidies currently in place.

"In my rent-regulated buildings, the City does not allow me to raise rents on certain units—which are already leased at rates well below the market—by more than a small amount, typically 3% per year," Mr. Hartman said. When, for example, heating oil prices increase, he has no choice but to pass the cost along to his free-market tenants in order to stay afloat. He explains, "This is unfair—I have regrettably watched hard-working families and small-business owners move out of my buildings and farther away from their jobs because they were unable to afford the increases."

Mr. Hartman has had to resort to some creative strategies to address the unfairness created by the housing system and to contend with rising costs. He negotiated a $15,000 cash payment to a tenant of his, in exchange for their moving out of a 3-bedroom apartment in the building that they were paying $300 / month for. He admitted, "This was an unusual situation, but the unfairness of rent regulation made this a win-win for me and my tenant; they received fair compensation, and I believe the true value of the apartment, after renovation, is $2,400 / month."

Although the issue in this case was rent regulation and not housing vouchers, these price ceilings are another example of government intervention with far-reaching and sometimes unexpected consequences. Mr. Hartman's reaction to all of this: "These subsidies create a culture of entitlement and disincentivize hard work. As the economist Thomas Sowell said, 'all of my housing has always been affordable, because I only housed where I could afford!'"

THE TENANT

Urban American has also been accused of colluding with Columbia University, with which they say they have no relationship. Columbia has acquired most of the land along Broadway between 3333 Broadway and its campus to the south, and is planning a large campus expansion over the next two decades. Dr. Steven Gregory, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Columbia said, "The spirit and even more or less the letter of housing laws and assistance programs are fair and ought to be left as is. The real issues are the documented cases of tenants being harassed, Major Capital Improvement applications [landlords' applications for government permission to increase rent based on renovation outlays] being inflated, and gentrification."

Are these benefits—just like my spot in a highly-desirable Princeton neighborhood — bestowed in a fair and consistent manner? The answer, as was the case in my childhood, is often no; however, it is not an easy matter to back away from this sort of intervention, either.

The reasons for this, as well as some

"This is unfair—I have regrettably watched hard-working families and small-business owners move out of my buildings and farther away from their jobs because they were unable to afford the increases."

Photo by Benjamin Fogarty


Photo by Lacey Gleason


Photo by Benjamin Fogarty

A family living on the 38th floor of 3333 Broadway

of the thinking informing current policy, are summarized by David Hershey-Webb, a partner of the law firm Himmelstein McConnell Gribben Donoghue & Joseph and noted housing attorney. He explains that it is not possible to view individuals as disconnected from one other: "the libertarian perspective is an anti-human one. It ignores the fact that, from a moral perspective, we are all part of an interconnected community, whether we choose to see it that way or not," he said. "The free market is a dangerous myth; it does not allocate resources fairly, and many of the things that makes the economy run, including most of the physical infrastructure of the country, were built by government spending."

Government spending, this line of thinking goes, is then necessary to help those who were disadvantaged (educationally, financially, neighborhood-wise, etc.), because—in the unequal way society's wealth and opportunity is passed down from generation to generation — they were deprived of resources and opportunities that others had through no fault of their own, or unfairly.

PRODUCTS OF OUR PAST

The genesis of our political convictions—yours and mine—is a complex, poorly-understood mix of genetics and experiences. Our backgrounds shape us and our personalities are inextricably bound up in where we come from. Ms. Barksdale's grandmother was a rental agent in this area, and she has lived virtually her entire life in the building. Mr. Eisenberg and Mr. Hartman carry on their fathers' real estate businesses.

My background growing up in public housing in Princeton shaped me too, but my experiences at 3333 Broadway have pushed me to reconsider even the very benefits that gave me an opportunity to succeed. Obviously, without the housing subsidy, I would have not have had access to the tremendous education and quality of life that Princeton gave me as a child. However, as long as I am the exception, and not the rule, it is hard to view the current system of housing in the United States as anything but uneven, relying on questionable criteria and often promoting dependence and cyclical poverty.

Andrew Choufrine, GS '13, is a neuroscience and philosophy major from Princeton, New Jersey. He worked for a health care technology startup for three years after high school, helped Idaho send a Democrat to the U.S. House for just the second time in 46 years, and aspires to become a U.S. Citizen some day soon. He can be reached at andrew@choufrine.com.

Illustration by Constance Castillo

A NEW SHADE OF GREEN

Iran's protest movement breaks from the theocratic order

By Puya Gerami

On Jan. 28, in the aftermath of the unprecedented mass demonstrations of late December in which millions of protesters challenged riot police in running street battles, the Iranian government publicly hanged Mohammad Reza Ali-Zamani and Arash Rahmanipour. Human rights organizations worldwide condemned the brutal executions, decrying the authoritarian regime's unequivocal attempts to silence dissent. The government alleged that the two innocents had committed *mohareb*, or enmity against God. In a desperate effort to monopolize political power through unspeakable state violence—frightening show-trials, police brutality, and mass imprisonment—the Islamic Republic of Iran contends that the civil unrest currently engulfing the country is the struggle between God and His enemies. The grassroots demonstrators have responded vociferously and unwaveringly: the fundamental conflict is not between God and His enemies but between the despotic dictator and the people who have risen finally to dismantle the roots of tyranny.

In June 2009, a fraudulent election which led to the alleged defeat of presidential candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi triggered mass urban protests which startled the entire Iranian body politic, from the frustrated middle classes to the highest echelons of clerical power. The protestors—soon deemed the Green Movement—demanded free and fair elections and the expansion of basic civil liberties, rapidly becoming a unique political phenomenon unseen in 30 years. Out of the sea of these nameless thousands, Mousavi emerged under the banner of internal reform, arguing that the current regime had abandoned the central tenets of the constitution. The regime refused to compromise with the grassroots demonstrators, and in the following six months government forces strangled dissent with ruthless impunity, stifling communication and imprisoning those suspected of encouraging the nascent protest movement.

Nevertheless, on Dec. 27, millions of demonstrators returned to the streets in city after city, fearlessly confronting the regime's armed forces, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and the *Basij* militias. The mass protests coincided with

the Islamic holiday of Ashura, a holy day of inestimable significance in which adherents condemn oppression and demand the end to social injustice. Aptly, that day, the demonstrators who united in strengthened numbers did precisely this.

The demonstrations on Ashura were similar to those of June in form and strategy, being largely self-organized and unarmed. Grassroots demonstrators used social networking technologies as a tool for activist organization, and the lack of a central authority in organizing the protests reinforced the mass democratic character of the movement. However, in terms of their content, the protests of Dec. 27 were significantly different from the earlier demonstrations of last June, showing that the movement—which has, at times, resisted categorization—has begun to demand far more than a fair vote.

First, what in June appeared to be a primarily middle class phenomenon has expanded to include members of all social groups throughout Iran, proving that the grassroots movement has, in part, transcended political factionalism to address the wider national discontent with dictatorial rule. Second, demands for the removal of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei from power, and most importantly, the demonstrators' direct challenge to the absolute rule of the cleric (*velayat-e-faqih*), show that what began as the immediate objection to undemocratic electoral policies has rapidly become a comprehensive rejection, on principle, of the theocratic regime. Above all else, the Ashura protests, in stark contrast with the post-election unrest of June 2009, signaled the radicalization of popular democratic elements, which in this critical moment have necessarily seized the reins of direction from the traditional leadership of Mousavi.

Since June, Mousavi has uneasily wavered as the unwitting figurehead of a movement that is fast contradicting his own political intentions. Although Mousavi admirably denounces the despotic tactics of the current regime and endorses the expansion of civil liberties, he also refuses to challenge the basic constitution of the IRI or abandon his steadfast loyalty to the legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini. Mousavi is precariously situated on the fault line of a political conflict that questions the foundation of the very status quo in which he was a key player.

The Western media lionizes Mousavi's role as a political activist, naively neglecting his participation during the darkest days of the IRI. During Mousavi's term as Prime Minister from 1981 to 1989, religious elites comfortably consolidated power while millions of young soldiers were killed in the Iran-Iraq War and millions more suffered in a political atmosphere characterized by

"The western media lionizes Mousavi's role as a political activist, naively neglecting his participation during the darkest days of the IRI."

Illustration by Constance Castillo

violent repression. Infamously, in 1988, while Mousavi served in office, an estimated number of between 10,000 and 30,000 leftist political dissidents were put to death in horrifying mass executions. It is difficult for human rights organizations to conclude an accurate estimate of innocents murdered during this time due to a lack of proper documentation. What is certain is that throughout these events Mousavi remained a consistent supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini.

For many, this political history is difficult to forget, and calls into question Mousavi's ability to represent a meaningful break with the IRI. Because of his past, and his immediate political concerns today, it is unlikely that Mousavi will be compliant with the increasing radicalization of the grassroots movement which he helped spark. In order to progressively seek a break with the regime, it will be necessary that the democratic movement distance itself from the reformist rhetoric of Mousavi. The events of Ashura represent this current shift, as protestors abandoned Mousavi's typical call for peaceful protest and internal compromise and instead actively confronted police and chanted anti-clerical slogans. Even the color green, once so unavoidably noticeable in the June protests, was conspicuously less prevalent in the events of Ashura.

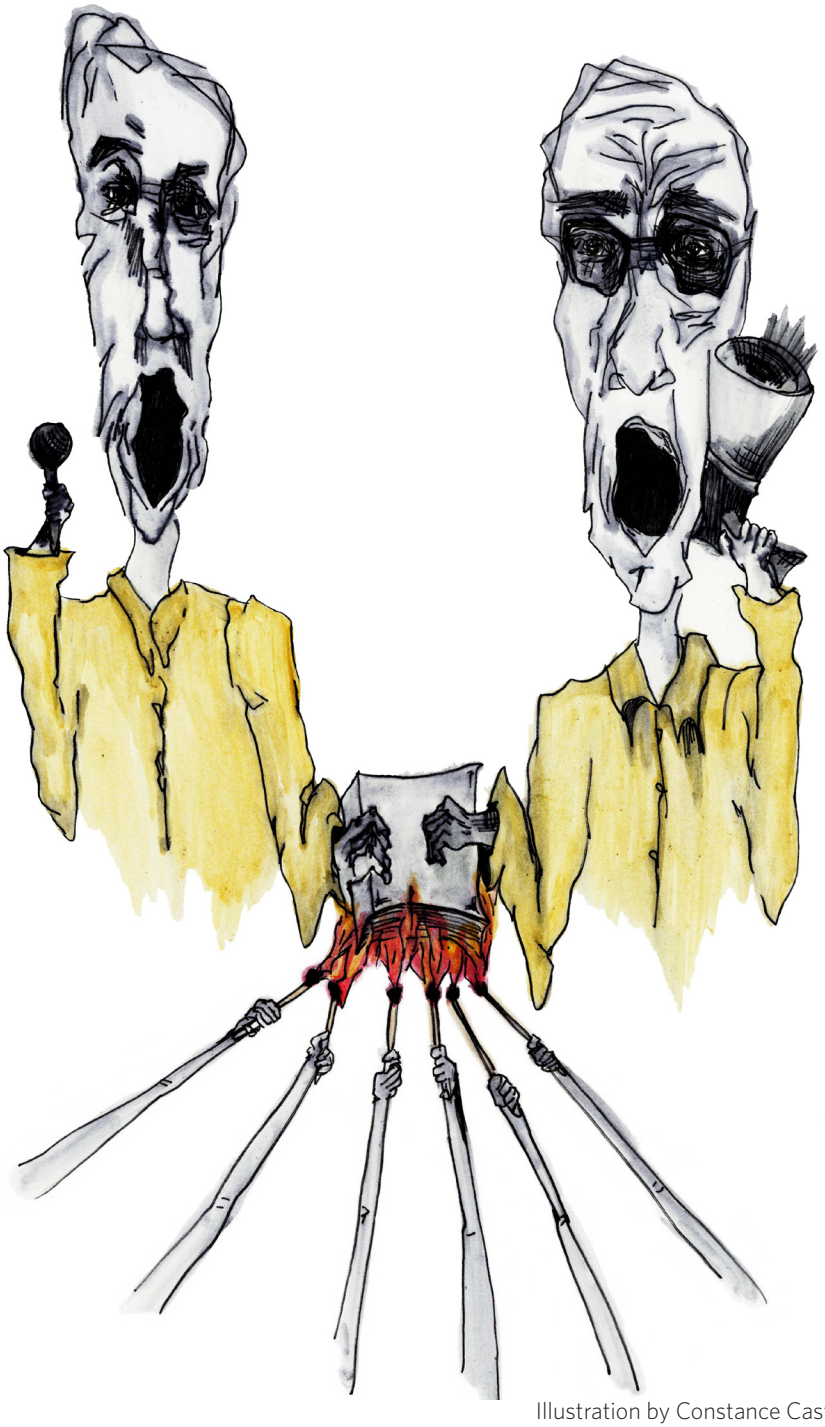

Illustration by Constance Castillo

But if we can only attain an accurate description of Mousavi by critically examining his history, then a sober appraisal of the protest movement is likewise only attained once it is located within the larger historical narrative of Iran. The social struggle in Iran today also identifies the inescapable politicization of historical memory; senior clerics, Mousavi, and grassroots demonstrators, all contend to redefine, rewrite, and reclaim the meaning of Iranian history as their own. Always, the year 1979 is imprinted indelibly within the political imaginations of those involved in today's events.

In 1979, left-wing student and working-class organizations spearheaded the mass opposition to the horrifying oppressions of the Shah's US-backed monarchy. These progressive, autonomous elements, often espousing the establishment of a republic guided by democratic values and social equality, endured the brunt of long-term repression under the Shah's rule. By 1979, these democratic movements united with clerical leaders, including the influential Ayatollah Khomeini, in total opposition to the monarchy, often sharing the rhetoric of anti-imperialism in their attempts to affirm the sovereignty of the Iranian people.

Soon after the overthrow of the Shah, however, a political struggle emerged between the left-wing elements that had once guided the revolution, and the increasingly reactionary partisans supporting Ayatollah Khomeini. By 1981, through keen political maneuvering and a willingness to liquidate dissent, Khomeini had effectively eradicated those left-wing democratic organizations from Iran, and instead established the IRI, based on the pillar of the absolute rule of the cleric. These were the beginnings of the theocratic regime that since has evolved into the current government: a multifaceted political hybrid which combines ideological coercion with draconian repression.

Countless critics have noted the striking similarities between the current grassroots movement and the revolutionary masses which toppled the Shah in 1979 as the world watched in awe. Yet beyond this immediately apparent historical analogy, it is perhaps far more important how the conflicting political groups today *consciously* contend to reinterpret the legacy of the 1979 revolution. The images, lexicon, and figures of that year have reemerged again and again in the civic unrest of recent months.

The regime constantly invokes its victories in 1979 to legitimate its current rule. It is no wonder that the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei lambasts the democratic opposition as "counterrevolutionary", ignoring the purported legacy of 1979, and conspiring with foreign agents to subvert the progress of Iranian patriotism in a "velvet revolution." Khamenei and other leading clerics venerate Ayatollah Khomeini as the father of an Iranian people, united by their belief in a conservative Islam and ultra-nationalist policies.

Mousavi, in turn, responds by conjuring the false memory of an Islamic revolution that laid a foundation for democracy and social progress that was only recently corrupted by wanderers from the original political goals of Khomeini. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Mousavi's historical outlook is his unflinching commitment to the ideals of Ayatollah Khomeini, for in this choice Mousavi remains complicit with the terrifying crimes of that leader's political program. Mousavi's historical reinterpretation is also a perversion of actual events, a complete ignorance of the repressive policies that the IRI introduced during its earliest years. Mousavi rewrites history as a myth, hoping to arbitrarily locate a respect for justice within the IRI which has forever been absent.

The popular masses, finally, also reinvent the meaning of 1979. During the Ashura protests of last December, demonstrators chanted slogans used in the political riots of 1979. When protestors chant "death to the dictator" in their demand to depose the Supreme Leader Khamenei, they are also making an implicit reference to the former Shah who had also once enacted tyrannical measures to quell popular revolt. News reports acknowledged that photographs of Ayatollah Khomeini had been defaced and burned in the streets.

In order to further realize their hopeful political aims, the grassroots movement must actively and finally confront the complexities of the political past. Specifically, in negating the brutality of the current regime, the trajectory of this oppositional movement shows that it must also condemn the entire history of the IRI and the reprehensible political ideology established by Ayatollah Khomeini. The achievement of meaningful social progress for this movement necessitates a reevaluation of the 1979 revolution, in its identification not with the detestable legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini, but rather with that of the left-wing democratic groups which had initiated the opposition movement to the Shah.

In this historical debate, the mass demonstrators are also attempting to redefine the nature of Iranian identity. For these activists, their Iranian nationalism embodies the resistance to oppressive political regimes and the relentless pursuit to establish a democratic republic. The supporters of this vision of a secular republic are properly attempting not to repeat the upheavals of 1979, but instead to redeem those struggles that had once so tragically failed. In the practical objective to uproot the conditions of its oppression, the grassroots movement not only reclaims its past, but also transcends it.

The Ashura protests challenged conventional political thinking by liberating the space for social discourse and reconsidering political possibilities. The demonstrators, in their method of protest, are able to question

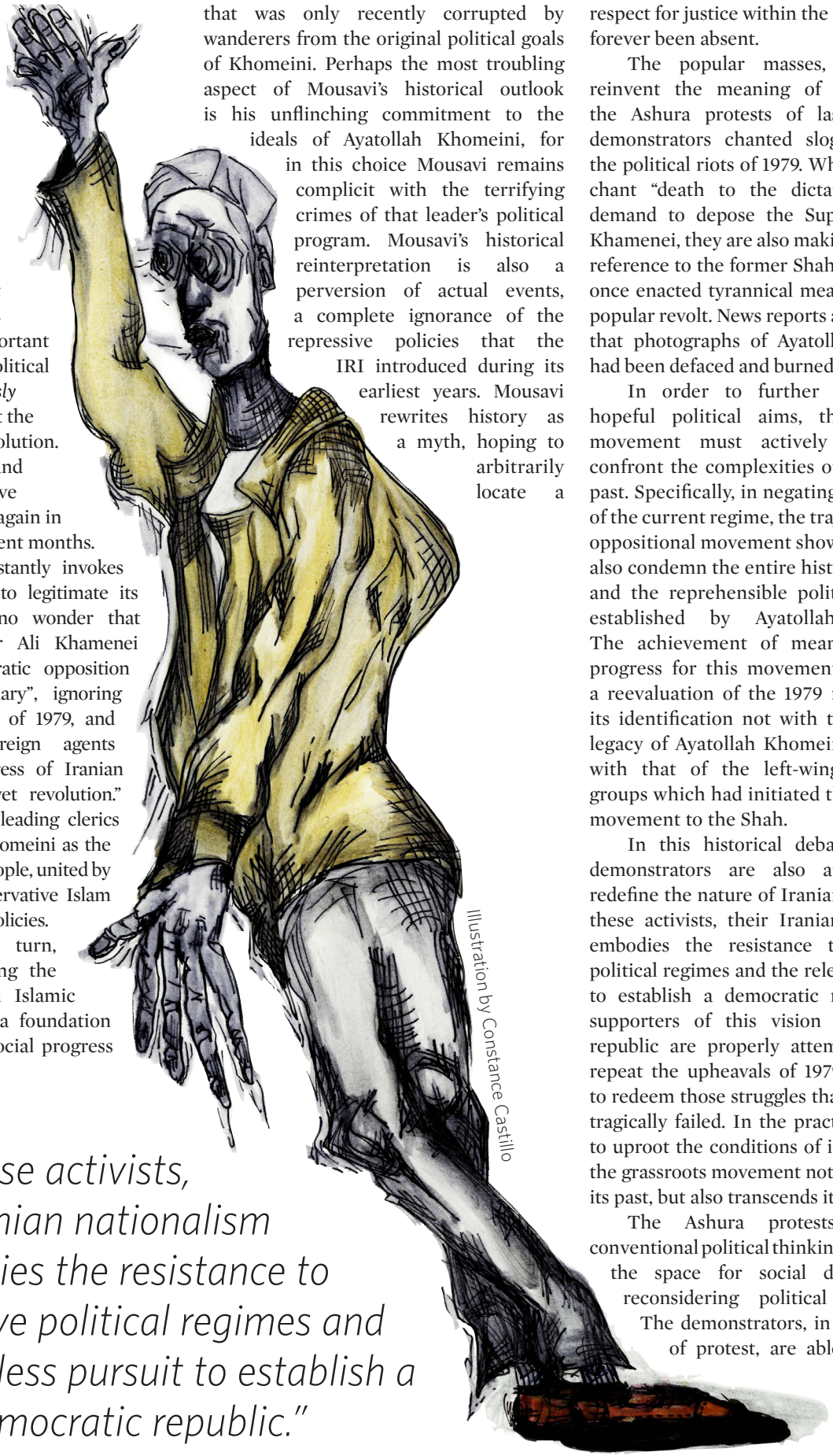

Illustration by Constance Castillo

"For these activists, their Iranian nationalism embodies the resistance to oppressive political regimes and the relentless pursuit to establish a democratic republic."

"Countless critics have noted the striking similarities between the current grassroots movement and the revolutionary masses which toppled the shah in 1979 as the world watched in awe. Yet beyond the immediately apparent historical analogy, it is perhaps far more important how the conflicting political groups today consciously contend to interpret the legacy of the 1979 revolution."

the conforming ideology of the ruling elite and finally confront the actual facts of their current political condition and the pressing concerns raised by a deliberate recognition of their national history. The reformist program of Mousavi and the compromises of internal change become, at best, politically irrelevant, and at worst, obstacles to realizable progress.

Today, the groundbreaking political upheaval in Iran cannot be readily analyzed due to our limited political information and our unbridgeable distance from the events unfolding each day. Outside observers are impervious to the hidden political interactions and unseen narratives of the struggle now shaking the foundation of Iranian politics. Nonetheless, the advent of the movement for popular democracy can rightly be called not only an unprecedented current in the greater region, but also a moment of world-historical significance. If one considers evidence of recent months, then it is likely that the grassroots protestors are becoming a real vehicle for political change in Iran, and moreover, an example for social justice movements worldwide. Uniquely inventing a space for political action, challenging every condemnable action of the powers that be, and redefining the very identity of Iranian nationhood, this mass movement challenges our conventional notions of democratic organization.

The advancements made during the Ashura demonstrations has simultaneously become the impetus for further democratic protests in the future and the symbol of popular discontent that has forced the regime to fear the burgeoning power of the common dissenter. The events of the single holy day of Ashura proved, to paraphrase Iranian thinker Ali Shariati, that every day is Ashura. For this movement, the struggle to achieve social liberation is an empowering process that now, even in the face of the lowliest tyrant, can never be deterred.

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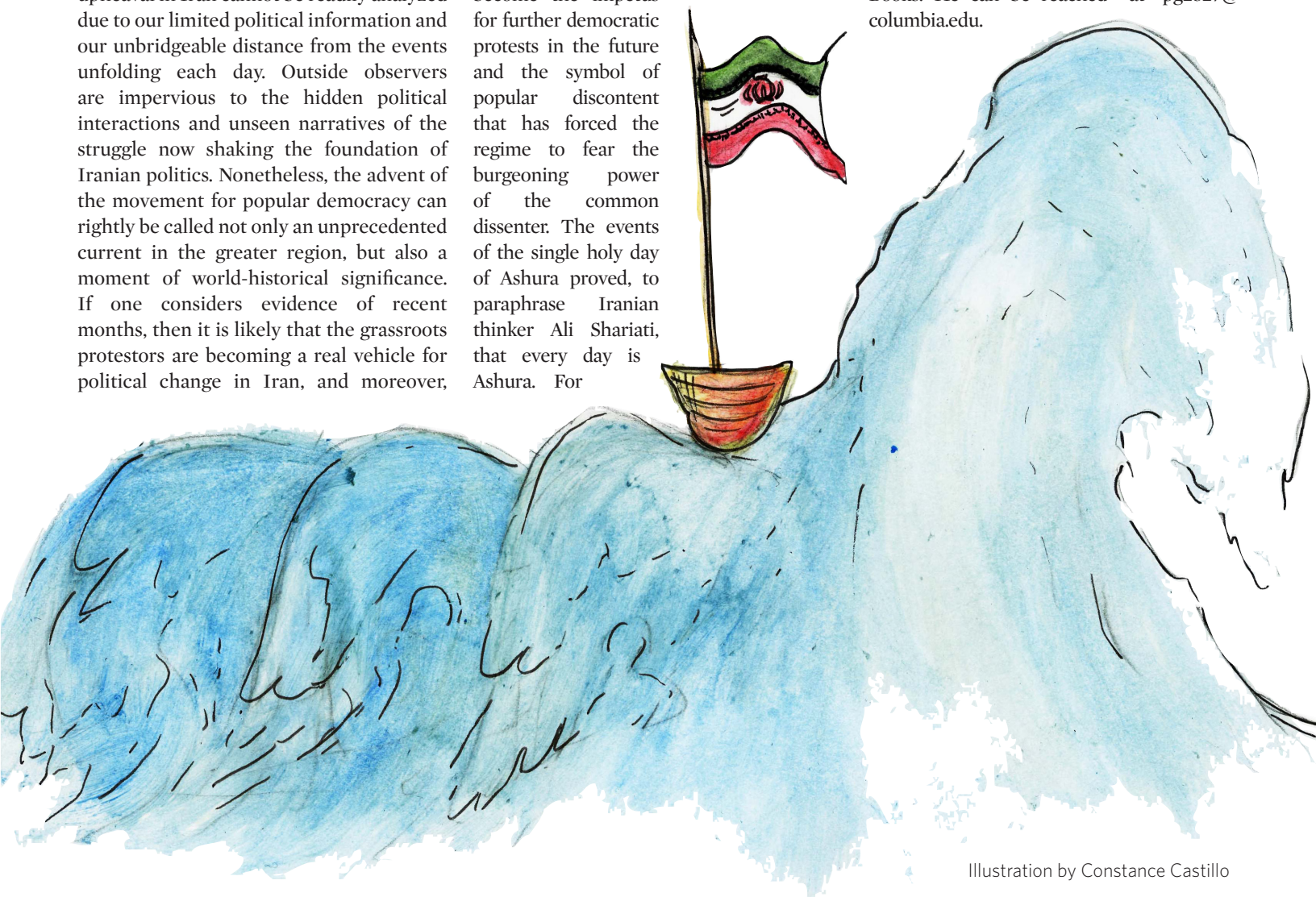

Illustration by Constance Castillo

GIVING UP THE GUN

Two Supreme Court cases bring gun control back into the crosshairs

By Sam Roth

Courtesy of Aurelieus

On the morning of March 30, 1981, President Ronald Reagan waved to the crowd as he departs a speaking event at a Washington D.C. hotel. Grinning characteristically, he holds out his hands to greet cries of "President Reagan!" with his benediction. John Hinckley, then, attempts to impress his idol Jodie Foster by firing six bullets at Reagan at point-blank range, and the statuesque figure of the President disappeared instantly from the scene. Watching the press footage of the incident, one barely gets a glimpse of his barreling limousine. Hinckley, a twenty-five-year-old from Ardmore, Oklahoma, who had stalked Foster for over a year, is hidden from view beneath a huddle of Secret Service agents. The most prominent figure on the scene is a squat-looking man in a three-piece grey suit and brown leather shoes, who bellows commands at the crowd. Press Secretary James Brady, Washington, D.C. police officer Thomas Delaharty, and Secret Service agent Timothy McCarthy all lie limp on the sidewalk and need an ambulance. There's no car to deposit Hinckley into, and the press keep trying to get a good look at the gunman's face. In his right hand, the grey-suited man hoists aloft a large submachine gun.

Several polls sponsored by *Time Magazine* in the run-up to the 1984 election asked Americans to identify issues that would influence their vote in November. Not surprisingly, between 42 and 52 percent of registered voters said the question of gun control would influence their decision "a lot," and between 82 and 86 percent said it would have some effect on their ballot.

But when asked the same question in 1996, only 4 percent of voters identified gun control as an important issue. In 2000, that number reached only 17 percent, despite the infamous shooting at Columbine High School the previous year. An MSNBC exit poll of the 2004 election didn't even include gun control as an option. Neither did the "Talking to America" survey of the electorate prior to the 2008 election.

Why not? Incidents at Columbine and Virginia Tech, after all, were far grislier than John Hinkley's failed assassination attempt, and lacked a smiling Presidential victim joking with surgeons in pre-op. In February 2010, Amy Bishop's murder of three of her colleagues in the biology department of the University of Alabama in Huntsville bore sad witness to the continuing power of gun crimes to captivate national attention, as did Jiverly Voong's April 2009, shooting spree at an immigrant center in Binghamton, New York, and US Army Major Nidal M. Hasan's armed assault on Fort Hood in Texas last November .

Can it be that, in spite of these isolated tragedies, the issue of gun control has been largely resolved? Since 1984, the number of US households with guns has declined from 47.5 percent to 36 percent, perhaps because violent crimes, too, have slowly declined since their 1990 peak. And 2,262 New Yorkers were murdered in 1990, compared to 471 last year. Perhaps it's not just the political weight of the gun control issue that's in decline, but the actual social gravity.

"Fewer Americans see a ... benefit in getting a gun for their personal protection," remarks Robert Spitzer, chair of the political science department at SUNY-Cortland and author of *The Politics of Gun Control*. "Most gun purchases are made by people who already own guns," Spitzer said, with the caveat that a paucity of good statistics makes definitive characterizations difficult.

Illustration by Leslie Koyama

Meanwhile, high-profile political candidates have moderated their views accordingly. While Democrats had put stronger gun control at the center of their platform for decades, President Bill Clinton in his 1992 campaign moderated that talk with references to the popularity of hunting in his home state of Arkansas. In the run-up to the 2008 election, Democratic Vice Presidential nominee Joe Biden spoke proudly of his guns and promised fellow owners of firearms that they had little to fear from then-Senator Barack Obama (D—Illinois). Even Senator John Kerry (D—Massachusetts) found it necessary to awkwardly trot out his hunting gear shortly before the 2004 contest, although he got someone else to carry the dead goose. Placatory messages from left-wing figures, meanwhile, have given the right little to campaign on. "Democrats have been stepping away from the issue, so it fades from public view," said Spitzer.

Thus, over time, the political debate became resilient to even the most public tragedies. In late July 1998, Russell Eugene "Rusty" Weston, Jr. jumped into his father's Chevy pickup and drove from Valmyer, Illinois, to Washington, D.C., in a single day. He didn't stop until he reached the Capitol. Inside, he tried to skirt the metal detector, and when Capitol Police officer J. J. Chestnut confronted him, Weston produced a .38 revolver and shot Chestnut in the eye. As civilians dove for cover, Weston marched on to the offices of Rep. Tom DeLay (R—Texas), then the House Majority Whip, where staffers were celebrating a recent legislative victory. Inside, Special Agent John Gibson was waiting for him. Both fired. Gibson died, while Weston was incapacitated. Walking outside the Capitol after the shooting, Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham (R—California) was asked what effect the shooting might

have on gun control laws. "After an incident like this, I'm sure there's going to be some reflection," he remarked, but by no means could Congress "take guns out of the hands of law-abiding citizens."

Two years ago, however, the moderate consensus was dealt a major blow. At the time, the District of Columbia Official Code prohibited residents of the city from keeping functional firearms at home. Dick Anthony Heller, a D.C. police officer who wanted to keep a gun in his residence, sued to overturn the law on the basis of the Second Amendment to the Constitution, which states, "A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed." The Supreme Court, voting 5-4, concurred with Heller, voiding the ban. While the court endorsed a broad range of acceptable limitations on the right to bear arms, such as the power of the government to ban guns from felons or the mentally ill, it ruled a that general prohibition violates the Constitution.

With *D.C. v. Heller*, the court broke a 70-year silence on the Second Amendment with a strong endorsement of the right to bear arms. The decision, in and of itself, had little effect: because DC. v. Heller struck down a law of the District of Columbia, it applied only to the federal government. But the Court has set the stage for a much greater change.

Contrary to public belief, the Bill of Rights initially did not apply to the states, limiting only federal powers. Starting in 1925, the Supreme Court began applying individual Constitutional amendments to strike down state and local laws. This selective "incorporation" of Constitutional freedoms, which relies on the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of "due process of law," has required state governments to abide by many of the guarantees of the Bill of Rights. The Second Amendment, however, has never been incorporated against the states.

Now, a pair of cases, *National Rifle Association v. Chicago* and *McDonald v. Chicago*, seems poised to accomplish just that. A host of legal experts, including Spitzer, concur that the Court will incorporate the Second Amendment against the states after *McDonald v. Chicago*'s oral arguments in March. The National Rifle Association, which hesitated to back Heller's case out of concern that the Court would rule against their interests, has since worked tirelessly to share in the spotlight of McDonald, signaling their newfound confidence. They, and allied organizations, have promised a host of legal challenges in McDonald's wake.

"For those who campaign for stricter limits on how and where guns may be acquired and used, the new legal challenges will create troublesome delays, if not outright roadblocks."

The consequences are potentially wide-reaching. "The NRA and the [libertarian] Cato Institute have made clear through their actions that they oppose essentially all gun laws," said Spitzer. To be sure, the District of Columbia's handgun ban and similar state laws addressed by McDonald mark some of the nation's toughest regulations. Nevertheless, many jurisdictions, including New York, could see changes in firearms policy. For example, a representative of the New York State Rifle and Pistol Association said that his organization could use McDonald to challenge a law that gives the NYPD broad discretion in granting handgun licenses. *D.C. v. Heller* makes allowances for "reasonable" restrictions, but much will rest on lower courts' application of that vague standard. For those who campaign for stricter limits on how and where guns may be acquired and used, including New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the new legal challenges will create troublesome delays, if not outright roadblocks.

D.C. v. Heller marks a victory for all advocates of looser gun laws, including many civil libertarians, recreational hunters, and other law-abiding citizens. "Most [gun-owners] own guns for hunting and sporting reasons," commented Spitzer. For one more worrisome group of citizens, however, the change could not come at a better time. In the 1990s, militias and conspiracy theorists directed a grim campaign of violence with government institutions and officeholders as the primary targets. The "Patriot" movement, which had largely vanished during George W. Bush's tenure in office, now seems to be making an aggressive return to the American landscape. According to a report by the Southern Poverty Law Center, over 50 new militia training groups have formed in recent years. Their rhetoric centers around a deep distrust of President Obama and of African-Americans more broadly, but the 2008 election alone does not explain the new rise in paramilitary activity. Controversially, in 2009 the FBI launched a new investigation of the links between Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and the new militias. Meanwhile, swirling theories of immigrant conspiracies further radicalize the militia movement, the Southern Poverty Law Center reports. The rise of more mainstream right-wing populist movements have also had their impact. "Some of the people who are gravitating to the Tea Party movement belong to this radical fringe," said Spitzer.

Certainly, the new militias are to some extent temporary and a product of changing conditions. Spikes in gun purchases after Sept. 11 and Obama's election did not mark sustained trends, suggesting that paramilitary activity is driven more by short-term fears than long-term planning. More to the point, fears surrounding 2009's economic depths likely drove some of the uptick in militia membership. A recent pronounced decline in illegal immigration should also serve to belie some of the anti-immigrant movement's claims of a building crisis. But at a time when even non-violent conservative movements play explicitly on ideas of revolution and uprising, recent developments in America's gun culture demand the public's attention. As Ronald Reagan, James Brady, Thomas Delaharty, and Timothy McCarthy discovered, peace can be shattered in an instant.

With thanks to Professor Richard Pious of Barnard College and Professor Robert Spitzer of SUNY-Cortland for their assistance.

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GRAND THEFT GOVERNMENT

How Wall Street got away

By Skanda Amarnath

Photo by Joyce Ng

The headlines make it obvious: banks are now earning record profits while the national unemployment rate hovers near ten percent. The clichéd "Wall Street vs. Main Street" dichotomy has become embedded in our political vernacular. Needless to say, the populist sentiment relating to Wall Street is not positive. Populism and sound economics have historically clashed. But the current state of financial regulatory reform—or rather, the lack thereof—is quickly changing that precedent.

Following the bailout—and subsequent lavish expenditures—of AIG, many feared angry populist sentiments leading to excessive regulation would be the major catalyst. Policymakers and politicians, including President Barack Obama, promised bailouts would end after financial regulation was reformed. Now, supposedly, is the time for the populists to triumph over the big banks, to tame the fat cats of Wall Street, and to end the big bonuses. In retrospect, many financial commentators were concerned that regulatory reform would put a straitjacket on the financial industry by means of taxing bonuses and capping CEO pay, among other measures.

Quite the opposite! No more than a few senators in the banking committee seem willing to support major restrictions on the financial industry. The financial industry is having its way with nearly every feature of the legislation being debated in Congress. How did the populist movement against Wall Street lose its teeth?

At the peak of the financial crisis during the early months of the Obama administration, it seemed as if the populist backlash against Wall Street would translate to radical reforms in the financial sector. Instead, the banking and financial sectors have scaled up their lobbying efforts and successfully pushed back against controversial elements of the regulatory legislation in Congress.

Regulatory reform will have to be more comprehensive if there is to be any substantial progress in preventing future financial crises. In hindsight, the regulatory framework that got the U.S. into this ongoing crisis was filled with numerous holes. Capital requirements were too low while institutions' activities and financial products lacked any form of transparency. Regulators lacked the necessary tools to allow large, complex banking and financial institutions to fail in an orderly manner, giving rise to the "Too Big to Fail" syndrome and an oversized banking system. Inadequate execution of consumer protection provisions and a flawed incentive structure for financial firms only added to the mess.

Liberals, conservatives, populists, and academics all seem to agree that financial institutions were under-capitalized heading into the crisis. Evidently, many of the major banks in the country lacked the necessary capital buffer to protect against

loan losses during the economic downturn. Yet there does not appear to be any method for determining the level to which standard capital requirements should be raised. Some academics have argued for tripling capital requirements, closer to levels banks held prior to the creation of a lender of last resort. As it stands now, the newly set capital requirements come nowhere near those levels. In fact, capital requirements would be raised not even to the levels Lehman Brothers held prior to its collapse.

Other experts claim that simply raising capital requirements to high levels does not seem politically practical. They say it is inevitable for the financial sector to eventually succeed in lobbying for the regulatory authorities to relax capital requirements, and that we will ultimately return to the initial capital requirements just before another crisis strikes. Instead, they have suggested that banks hold a significant amount of capital in convertible bonds, which will allow for the conversion of debt into equity. If a bank comes under stress and poses systemic risk, much of their debt could be converted into equity, thereby reducing the firm's total liabilities. Yet, as Columbia University Assistant Professor of economics Jón Steinsson pointed out, "Some of these [distressed] banks had contingent capital but they did not convert the debt into equity; they thought the debtholders would be angry. The key is you should not let the firm decide; the government should have the ability to convert capital."

To some extent, the proposals to increase capital requirements and issuance of convertible debt have been included in House and Senate bills, but the legislation falls short of what most experts would like to see.

Signs of consensus between Democrats and Republicans quickly began to fade once the complexity of creating an effective resolution authority became apparent. The proposed resolution would give regulatory authorities the power to seize and allow a large, complex financial institution to fail in an orderly manner, preventing future financial crises. Currently, if a large financial firm falls into distress, the authority can either allow the firm to fail or bail the firm out by injecting the necessary capital. The former option was tried with Lehman Brothers, but it created chaos in financial markets and large social costs for the greater economy. The latter option was tried with AIG and the populist uproar towards that bailout has been well-documented. An already established resolution authority with standard protocols on how to behave in these situations would help sidestep the inefficient and disorderly features of the bankruptcy process with respect to financial institutions while avoiding the issues of moral hazard associated with bailouts. The Treasury's current plan would give the government, specifically the FDIC and the Treasury itself, the ability to seize a large, failing, non-bank institution immediately and put it through a resolution process. However, the Senate Republicans have argued that if the government were to seize a failing non-bank institution, it should have to go through more rigorous checks and approvals beforehand. The trouble is that the Senate Republicans' plan would make the government resolution procedure more susceptible to creating complications while regulators are trying to wind down an institution. When responding to an emergency situation, approval processes and committee meetings are counterproductive to effectively resolving the problem at hand. Yet surprisingly, the Republicans' proposal on resolution authority will likely be in the Senate bill.

Ricardo Reis, a Columbia University professor of economics, noted, "Resolution procedures need to be developed in greater depth. The current legislation seems very vague about how to resolve a large, interconnected financial institution." Much of what led to the aftershocks when Lehman Brothers failed was that the firm held much of its assets in other countries, operating under different legal frameworks. It appears that no one in Congress has thought about the complications that cross-border banks would create. Some have thrown around the idea that these highly interconnected institutions should have living wills—what some call shelf-bankruptcy plans—which are updated on a regular basis in order for the resolution process to go as smoothly as possible. Steinsson threw his support behind the idea of contingency plans, stating that they would serve as "insurance that the government will have at least a minimum amount of information" during a government-controlled resolution. Unfortunately, there have been very few specifics with respect to living wills and by no means will it clear up the problems associated with a government-structured resolution procedure. While the Senate supports the need for a resolution authority, it seems as though no one realizes that a half-baked resolution procedure would not be enough to solve the too-big-to-fail problem.

"Evidently, Dodd would rather stroke his ego with a bipartisan bill that minimally reforms the system than fight for a bill that would bring significant change and reform."

While the efforts in Congress to reform the financial regulatory framework have been disappointing, the House of Representatives did pass a bill a few months ago that includes the creation of a Consumer Financial Protection Agency. Regrettably, the likelihood of a CFPA being included in the final bill seems low unless Senator Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.),

Chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, changes his tone. Republicans on the Senate Banking Committee are already not in favor of the creation of a new regulatory agency and Senator Dodd appears willing to compromise on this feature of regulatory reform. Instead, he argues for greater enhancement of consumer protection divisions under existing regulatory bodies. The issue here is whether consumer protection should be separated from bank regulation. Some might see this task as nothing more than rearranging responsibilities, but consumer protection and bank regulation are two distinct and specialized areas. "Consumer protection in finance requires a level of expertise much higher than what is needed for basic consumer protection," said Reis. "For effective regulation in finance, you need smart people; financial products are not like toys; you don't need the best chemists to test out whether a toy is defective." For a regulatory body to maintain focus on two distinct areas of regulation seems no less than impossible.

Looking back on this past crisis, it is likely that the lack of consumer protection created a situation in which financial innovation could get out of hand so easily. The creation of the CFPA would allow regulators to get ahead of the curve on new financial products without clamping down on financial innovation altogether. Including the CFPA in the bill makes political sense since it sends the message to the public that Congress is serious about confronting the abuses of the financial industry. Hence, it seems baffling that Senate Democrats and Republicans have not embraced the idea. The only reasonable explanation is that the interest groups representing the financial industry are playing a major role in this debate, thereby demonstrating, yet again, the underwhelming effect of populism on the debate.

Since Obama's election, the populist sentiment against the bailouts and what is seen as the excesses of the financial sector has not materialized into any meaningful legislation in Congress. In early 2010, however, the tone of the administration changed strikingly. President Obama announced in January that he would like Congress to include the Volcker Rule, which would prevent banks from engaging in other speculative activities beyond traditional commercial banking responsibilities.

The centerpiece to the Volcker Rule is the reinstitution of the Glass-Steagall Act, in spirit. Glass-Steagall was enacted in 1933 in order to separate commercial banking, which involves taking deposits and subsequently loaning them out, from other banking activities, widely considered to be more risky, relating to capital markets. While its measures faded away as commercial banks found ways to engage in off-balance sheet and speculative activities, Glass-Steagall was only officially repealed via the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act in 1999. The repeal of the act removed all boundaries between commercial banking and other financial activities while allowing commercial banks to acquire non-bank financial institutions. Some saw its repeal as an opportunity to increase the productivity of the financial industry, but as Reis states, "We have to look at the effects of the repeal of Glass-Steagall. The financial industry did not become more productive. There were not many synergies made in this past period." The repeal of Glass-Steagall likely brought more risk to the system rather than less.

Commercial banking is largely considered a necessary component of the economy and worthy of public support in the form of a lender of last resort. Thus, the public provides a subsidy for banks to manage the payments system, take in deposits, and loan them out to worthy borrowers. Following Gramm-Leach-Bliley, bank holding companies could engage in more speculative activities while still gaining access to this safety net. Does this not imply that the public is subsidizing speculative activities distinctly different from commercial banking? Thus, the supporters of the Volcker Rule argue for restoring the boundaries between commercial banking and more speculative activities. Clearly, there are complications with regard to specifics on how to re-create these boundaries when much of Glass-Steagall could have been easily bypassed under current conditions. Nevertheless, it is hard not to see both the merit and populist appeal in this proposal.

Considering how many transformative proposals have been pushed aside, how exactly did the populist movement against Wall Street become defanged in little more than a year after the bailouts and the peak of the financial crisis?

"Signs of consensus between Democrats and Republicans quickly begin to fade once the complexity of creating an effective resolution authority becomes apparent."

Let us begin with Dodd, the Chairman of the Senate Banking Committee. His ties with the financial industry go back a long way—and for good reason. Many of his constituents in Connecticut work in the financial sector. In addition, Senator Dodd is retiring this year; this bill is likely to be his last hurrah. At the end of Paul Volcker's testimony, Senator Dodd essentially admitted that, in his view, bipartisanship was more important than solving the problem: "I don't want to go to the floor of the United States Senate begging for a 60th vote." Evidently, he would rather stroke his ego with a bipartisan bill that minimally reforms the system than fight for a bill that would bring significant change and reform.

Consider, too, Senator Richard Shelby (R-Ala.), the Ranking Member of the Senate Banking Committee, who was a thorn in the side of Wall Street when the legislation for the Troubled Asset Relief Program was going through Congress. However, 2010 has a different priority: getting re-elected.

Photo by Joyce Ng

All of a sudden, he becomes a friend to the financial, real estate, and insurance sectors, all which are now helping fund his campaign. If the two leading members of the Senate Banking Committee are not committed to reforming the system, what hope is there for substantial change to the regulatory framework?

The financial industry's lobbying efforts and contributions to Senators' campaigns should not come as a shock to anyone. What is truly remarkable is that few, if any, interest groups have lobbied on the side of more aggressive regulation. In view of the scope and magnitude of the financial crisis, one would think that an interest group would lobby forcefully for stronger regulation of the financial sector. Evidently, no interest group has filled the role of counteracting the efforts of the financial industry to thwart significant regulatory reform.

No level-headed individual wants angry populism to determine legislation, but to see public sentiment and any serious reform effort overrun by corporate interests is a sign that something is seriously wrong. Many often cite regulatory capture as a deep-rooted problem because the SEC and other financial regulatory authorities are filled with former leaders of financial firms who serve the interests of the financial industry over the interests of the public. What we have here is Congressional capture: members of Congress have been captured by the interests of the banking and financial sectors.

The Democrats missed a clear opportunity to take a more aggressive stance on reforming the regulatory framework. The regulatory reform legislation in Congress could have set forth sound policy for the long-term while still yielding great political profit for representatives and senators from both parties. Disappointingly, reform will almost certainly fall short of what is needed and generate little political return for the Democrats. The final bill will have some benefits: it will raise capital and liquidity requirements, mandate banks to hold easily convertible debt to buffer against times of financial duress, and enforce clearance from central counterparties for derivative transactions in order to assure a safe trading environment. In light of all of the sound reforms that potentially could have been enacted based on public sentiment but ultimately were not, though, America let a good crisis go to waste.

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THINLY VEILED

National identity and the politics of the body in modern France

By Pooja Reddy

Photo by Leeza Mangaldas

After nearly six months of deliberation, a French parliamentary committee recently proposed a ban on Islamic face veils in government spaces, including hospitals, schools, public transportation and, theoretically, even the Champs-Élysées. This decision is only the most recent iteration of what *Le Monde* has dubbed a "national psychodrama" that has spanned decades of government wrangling, produced volumes of national press coverage, and spawned many governmental commissions. In this most recent iteration, French ministers point to the face veil as a sartorial "challenge to the republic" and, according to one, "a symbol of the repression of women."

With the help of the French, the veil—also known more accurately in various forms as the burqa, hijab or *niqab*—has conquered both the bra and the bikini as the world's most contentious piece of women's apparel. One colorful French minister even proclaimed it a *fichu fichu* (damned scarf). Intended to hide women from unnecessary attention, the burqa has, ironically, made them increasingly noticeable. As a central symbol of Muslim transpolitics, the burqa flutters at the center of debates on national identity, feminist ethics and postcolonial—even anticolonial—movements, inviting an opinion from seemingly everyone except the young burqa-donning women themselves.

While many other European countries have contemplated legislation concerning the burqa, none have passed restrictions comparable to the scale or scope of the French ban. The UK's *Times* went so far as to say that it "would not be British to ban the burqa."

The first few sentences of the French Constitution indicate that banning the burqa might not be un-French, though. Secularism makes an appearance in the very first line of the document, mentioned even before equality and democracy, and is reiterated in different ways three times just in the first paragraph. The term for French secularism, or *la laïcité*, has no clear English equivalent but, in a nutshell, translates to the absolute separation of state and religion and the strict neutrality of the government with respect to any and all religious beliefs. It can also imply that, because religion is considered to be a strictly private affair meant to be practiced behind closed doors, it must not enter the public sphere.

The legal frameworks of the United States and France, for example, both include the Establishment Clause, which delineates the separation of church and state, and the Free Exercise Clause, which protects freedom of religion. When these two ideals clash, each county has historically tended to prefer one: the French value the former, while the Americans have traditionally stressed the latter. This uniquely French approach prevents many of the devout from practicing their religion in the public sphere. In contrast, religion is deeply imbedded in the functioning and legal framework of the state in most Islamic countries. As France's second-largest—and fastest growing— religion, Islam and *la laïcité* were bound to clash.

"The cultural battleground has been declared and the battleground is to be the bodies of women."

In 2003, for example, President Jacques Chirac passed a law that banned all "conspicuous religious insignia" in French schools. While this action drew much criticism from activist groups, both Islamic and not, for curtailing expressive freedom, the Chirac government had a uniquely French stance on the issue: if *la laïcité* is to be taught to the next generation of French citizens, it must be done so through schooling in a secular environment, regardless of the number of young girls who must be expelled in order to create such a setting.

Considering the ethnic composition of the communities affected, however, this state-sanctioned punishment is unlikely to produce the desired results. While France's large Muslim community is primarily Maghrebian, a community with old colonial ties to France that has largely been assimilated into local culture, the less than 2,000 women estimated to wear the burqa, for the most part, do not belong to this community. They hail from a vast diaspora of recent immigrants originating from Turkey, Algeria, the Middle East, and even sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, most of the young women at the center of this debate are economically disadvantaged recent immigrants who live in cultural ghettos of sorts. The burqa is not only indicative of these immigrants' beliefs, cultural ties and even force of habit, but also of their disenfranchisement and displacement, both geographically and socially. While this article of clothing pertains more to France's current national identity crisis rather than its past colonial tensions, the political and historical nature of the burqa has reignited both issues.

The politicization of the burqa in modern times can be traced to Egypt in the late 19th century. This phenomenon has since caused repercussions throughout the Maghreb region and the wider Islamic and European world. In the 1920s, the Egyptian government called for unveiling as a precondition to modernizing the nation. This campaign was so successful that by the 1950s, the burqa had nearly vanished in Egypt's cities and steadily waned in its countryside. Many key ideological interpretations of the veil began with the Egyptian campaign, interpretations that continue to saturate the veil in both the West and the Islamic world today.

In this imperial setting, according to Harvard Divinity School professor Leila Ahmed, the veil "became a symbol of inferiority, comprehensively, of the Islamic Other" and also "signaled a commitment to the project of modernity." Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Turkish Republic, and Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran banned the burqa in their respective countries in order to signal their commitment to modernization. To these national leaders, changing their citizens' clothing was a way of changing not just their own mindsets, but also their national image in the eyes of the progressive, European countries they sought to emulate.

The Islamic response to these two colonial narratives championed the veil as a way of becoming modern while still retaining Muslim identity in a gendered recasting of different-but-equal. Muslim women could be progressive—but within bounds determined by men and attributed to divine law. Consider the Cairo Declaration of 1981 wherein men are charged with the welfare of the household while women are duty-bound to be good wives and mothers,

based on Sharia law. By framing the range of women's behavior within such narrow bounds, the Islamist rejoinder was no less imperialist with respect to women's bodies than the colonial ideology.

Between these two starkly divided camps, the burqa had effectively become both a political metaphor of freedom and a symbol of cultural authenticity. While France makes strides to ban the burqa, Islamic nations from Afghanistan to Somalia impose the veil in order to make exactly the opposite point: to deny the "corrupting" influence of the West and affirm the centrality of religion.

What becomes amply clear from this discussion is that debates on the place and function of the burqa became less about the emancipation of women and more about defining and maintaining the discursive identity of the nation. The cultural wars have been declared, and the battleground is to be the bodies of women. As recently as 2004, the burqa was used as moral justification for the United States' war on Afghanistan. As Ahmed writes, the burqa's "fleeting appearance on television could function as explanation enough of what we were doing and why we were at war—packaged into one image were all those old notions of superior/inferior, saving the women, and moral rightness."

"Tangible improvements to women's lives should trump any and all disputes over symbolic ideas."

Illustration by Olivia Shih

In order to highlight the politicized nature of the burqa, compare it to the sari, another garment that, though not as controversial, has been subject to much colonial scrutiny. The Indian sari is a continuous fabric of cloth ranging from four to nine meters, draped in a variety of ways across the right shoulder and worn with an upper garment that leaves the midriff and lower back bare. Journalist Jennifer Heath writes in *The Veil: Women Writers on its History, Lore and Politics*, "The sari offers choice. It is both revealing and concealing. ... The power, how much to show, how much to hide, lies in the woman, prescribed only, though never completely, by her family, culture, and nearest male kin."

Upon British colonization, however, this native dress became the subject of severe criticism due to its perceived immodesty. British writer Fanny Parks Farlby remarks that "the dress was rather transparent, almost useless as a veil. ... The form of the limbs and tint of the skin is traced through it." Redesigning the sari to suit the Victorian notions of female modesty became an integral part of the social reform program in Bengal and many other regions in India, and succeeded in adding layers to the sari that, considering the climate, was unbefitting the weather. Obvious differences between the British and French notwithstanding, this case illustrates that revealing too much was considered just as faulty as revealing too little. Adopting the same notions of sartorial decency as the colonial onlooker was the way to achieve "just right."

While these debates and bans continue, Muslim women from Turkey to France are at risk of losing the right to be educated merely for their choice of clothing. Tangible improvements to women's lives should trump any and all disputes over symbolic ideas. By enacting this ban, the French state will continue to perpetuate the cycle of bans and mandatory enforcements in a tiring repetition of political moves and countermoves that detract attention from the critical needs of contemporary women. As associate professor at the University of Sydney Browyn Winter writes, the French debate "is once again condemning those feminists who have long spoken about the manipulation of their bodies, lives and voices by both the church and state, to keep repeating themselves."

While the reasons for veiling are as numerous and complex as the women who don them, coercive veiling or unveiling are equally problematic in opposite ways, and a solution can be found only by providing women the tools by which to make their own choices: tools such as education and gainful employment. In the meantime, France has a difficult decision to make. History has shown that veiling predates Islam and will almost certainly outlast these current debates: when legislators attempt to protect *la laïcité* at any cost, they deprive those who have the most to gain from a rational, secular state from its benefits: a rigorous education, freedom of movement, and a non-coercive atmosphere.

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Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime, by John Heilemann and Mark Halperin
Harper; $27.99, 464 pages

Going Rogue: An American Life, by Sarah Palin
HarperCollins; $28.99, 432 pages

Illustration by Taimur Malik

POLITICIANS—THEY'RE JUST LIKE US!

By Hillary Busis

Hillary Clinton is a brilliant, paranoid bitch. Barack Obama is clever but arrogant. The less said about John Edwards, the better—ditto for his wife, Elizabeth. Okay, fine: she's an "abusive, intrusive, paranoid, condescending crazywoman."

None of the luminaries John Heilemann and Mark Halperin follow in *Game Change*, their chronicle of the 2008 presidential election, come out with dignity intact. After all, the election unfolded in a series of increasingly sordid scandals, from Reverend Wright to all that was Sarah Palin; the news that Edwards had fathered a child out of wedlock while campaigning was just the icing on the already-salacious cake. In that sense, Heilemann and Halperin's tome is nothing more than a longer version of the soundbites emanating throughout the electoral circus.

But the manner in which these journalists gathered their material sets them apart from their colleagues, even if the material itself is more of the same. In an authors' note, Heilemann and Halperin explain that their book is based on "more than three hundred interviews with more than two hundred people conducted between July 2008 and September 2009." But these interviews were also "conducted on a 'deep background' basis," meaning the authors agreed not to identify their sources after quoting or paraphrasing them.

To justify their unsourced information, Heilemann and Halperin say that unless they depended on deep background interviews, they would not have elicited "the level of candor on which a book of this sort depends." Reasonable enough;

what former Clinton staffer, for example, would want to admit that she's the "senior-most lieutenant" quoted as thinking, "This woman shouldn't be president" after Hillary's defeat in the Iowa caucus?

Game Change's haze of anonymity allows for all manner of juicy tidbits. That nasty summation of Elizabeth Edwards has surfaced again and again in reviews of and articles about the book; it could be *Game Change*'s most famous sound bite, second only to Harry Reid's now-notorious assessment of Obama as a "light-skinned" African American "with no Negro dialect." Eager readers have made *Game Change* the best-selling book in America for four weeks straight, according to *The New York Times*, as well as the best-selling nonfiction title on Amazon.

But although *Game Change* is indisputably entertaining, its unsourced nature has grabbed negative attention, too. Clark Hoyt of *The New York Times* notes that while Bob Woodward also used deep background interviews in *State of Denial*, he included "29 pages of source notes" at the end of his book—something the authors of *Game Change* failed to do. Unless it's properly cited, there seems to be little that differentiates deep background research from garden-variety gossip.

Heilemann and Halperin, of course, resist being labeled as foremen at a rumor mill. Gossip "implies loose cocktail-party chatter," Heilemann told *Entertainment Weekly*. "The only things we put into the book were things that had real significance for the race."

His claim is debatable—as hilarious as it is to read how McCain once exploded in reference to his daughter Meghan (CC '06), saying "How many fucking times can you fucking graduate from fucking Columbia?" that moment doesn't seem like it was particularly important to his campaign. Nevertheless, Heilemann's assertion raises an interesting question: When is gossip a real political force?

The answer, apparently, is "often." *Game Change* proves that in the 2008 election, the line between idle chatter and truth was wafer-thin. Rumors of John Edwards's infidelity flitted about his camp long before the media caught on. And the fact that Edwards was eventually exposed by the *National Enquirer* is even greater evidence that gossipmongering and legitimate reporting aren't always as different as elite media types might have us believe. The anonymous sources who confirmed to the *Enquirer* that Edwards was having an affair bear a remarkable resemblance to Heilemann and Halperin's unnamed informants.

Then there's Sarah Palin's memoir, *Going Rogue*—released last November—which seems as though it was crafted chiefly in order to put rumors to rest. The second half of the book systematically refutes every claim made against Palin during the election, anticipating the charges raised against her in *Game Change*. While Heilemann and Halperin contend that Palin flunked her interviews with Katie Couric because she failed to prepare properly for them, Palin preemptively refutes them by saying she was merely "annoyed and frustrated with many of her [Couric's] repetitive, biased questions." While *Game Change* notes the campaign's astonishment at Palin's clothing bills, the former governor shifts the blame to her handlers: "I never asked the New York stylists to purchase clothes, many of the items were never worn ... and in the end the wardrobe items were all returned." Over and over again, Palin portrays herself as an innocent victim of *Game Change*-style gossip, blaming members of the liberal media for telling tales without any research.

But Palin fights gossip by going to the tabloid playbook. *Going Rogue* includes two sections of full-color photos printed on glossy paper, pictures that are meant to prove to readers that the Palins are a normal family that engages in normal activities like basketball and snowmobile races. It's a calculated move—straight out of the "Celebrities: They're Just Like Us!" school of reportage. She also takes digs at the likes of Couric ("the lowest-rated news anchor in network television") and McCain strategist Steve Schmidt ("As he lectured, I took in his rotund physique"), who has openly criticized Palin since the election. These snide comments are in the vein of Perez Hilton, not Thomas Jefferson.

"Game Change proves that in the 2008 election, the line between the idle chatter and the truth was wafer thin."

But really, can you blame her? Both snark and shady sourcing sell—and since the publishing industry is as imperiled as the blobfish, that matters more than concerns about ethics. The distinction between legitimate reporting methods and illegitimate ones will no doubt continue to shrink. Soon, the rules of tabloid journalism may become the rules for journalism, period. Whether or not this spells a death knell for journalistic integrity is still up in the air. Those who loved *Game Change* probably don't think it's a big deal. People like Clark Hoyt, though, might want to consider making a career change.

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CALL FOR PITCHES: April 2010 Issue

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