

POWER7 Systems™ from IBM  
Power your planet >

Smarter systems for a Smarter Planet

Get 4 FREE trial issues >>

Subscribe Student offers



Log in | Register | My account Newsletters | RSS | Subscribe | Classifieds

Thursday March 25th 2010

Search

Home World Business & Finance Science & Technology Markets & Data Culture Site Index Print Edition



A blog by the author of our column on American politics

## Lexington's notebook

### The end of big government liberalism

Mar 24th 2010, 14:43 by Lexington

MATT YGLESIAS argues that, with the passage of Obamacare, [the era of "big government liberalism" is over](#):

*For the past 65-70 years—and especially for the past 30 years since the end of the civil rights argument—American politics has been dominated by controversy over the size and scope of the welfare state. Today, that argument is largely over with liberals having largely won.*

He goes on:

*[P]rogressive efforts to expand the size of the welfare state are basically done. There are big items still on the progressive agenda. But they don't really involve substantial new expenditures. Instead, you're looking at carbon pricing, financial regulatory reform, and immigration reform as the medium-term agenda. Most broadly, questions about how to boost growth, how to deliver public services effectively, and about the appropriate balance of social investment between children and the elderly will take center stage.*

I'd like to think this was true. But I don't see how it can be. I agree that the enactment of almost-universal health coverage checks off a huge item on the progressive "to do" list. But it doesn't change the most basic force in democratic politics: that voters like to vote themselves goodies at someone else's expense.

Once non-poor, non-elderly Americans get a taste of direct government subsidies for health insurance, they will ask for more. They will not always get it, because taxpayers vote, too, and the bond market doesn't care whether your back hurts. But often, they will get it. And the battle will go on.

To illustrate this point, here's a chart showing what has happened to [federal health spending since 1970](#).

Comment (29) Recommend (11) E-mail Share Print Permalink

### Fire Nancy Pelosi

Mar 22nd 2010, 21:04 by Lexington

IT IS only natural that the Republican Party should respond to the passing of Obamacare by appealing for Americans to vote Republican in November. And it is true that the first consequence of a Republican takeover of the House would be that Nancy Pelosi would lose her job as speaker.

Nonetheless, it is a bit ungentlemanly to illustrate a call for voters to "Fire Pelosi" with a picture of her [engulfed in flames](#).

UPDATE: Diane Sawyer of ABC News read to Mrs Pelosi a line from my latest [column](#) in which I described her as "[arguably the most powerful woman in American history](#)." Mrs Pelosi's response was that she didn't take it personally but saw it as "a compliment for all women".

#### About Lexington's notebook

In this blog, our Lexington columnist enters America's political fray and shares the many opinions that don't make it into his column each week.

RSS feed

Advertisement

For a free trial [click here](#)

#### Economist blogs

- Babbage
- Bagehot's notebook
- Banyan's notebook
- Buttonwood's notebook
- Charlemagne's notebook
- Democracy in America
- Free exchange
- Gulliver
- Lexington's notebook

#### Products & events

##### Stay informed today and every day

Subscribe to *The Economist's* free e-mail newsletters and alerts.

[Get e-mail newsletters](#)

Subscribe to *The Economist's* latest article postings on Twitter

[Follow The Economist on Twitter](#)

See a selection of *The Economist's* articles, events, topical videos and debates on Facebook.

[Follow The Economist on Facebook](#)

Advertisement

One could interpret this as charming modesty, or false modesty, or whatever. But what strikes me is what utter gibberish it is. How can an observation about one woman's power relative to other women be a compliment for all women? If you say "Shakespeare was the greatest writer ever", should I take this as a compliment to me because I also write for a living? That would be absurd. It seems that political skill and clear thinking don't always go hand in hand.

[Comment \(32\)](#) [Recommend \(37\)](#) [E-mail](#) [Share](#) [Print](#) [Permalink](#)



## Local news is good news

Mar 22nd 2010, 21:03 by Lexington

ONE of the delights of travelling around America is dipping into local papers. As a rule of thumb, the smaller the paper, the more heart-warming the news. In the idyllic suburb outside Houston where I was staying last week, this headline grabbed me: "[Woodlands teenager Caldwell gets free ice cream for life](#)".

[Comment \(10\)](#) [Recommend \(18\)](#) [E-mail](#) [Share](#) [Print](#) [Permalink](#)



We are making continuous improvements to *The Economist* website and are interested in your thoughts.

Please leave your feedback.

## The joys of overcrowding

Mar 20th 2010, 14:02 by Lexington

I WAS in Texas yesterday, researching a piece about crime and punishment. The good news is that [the number of prisoners in state lock-ups has fallen slightly](#), partly because budget horrors have forced some states, such as California, to release a few thousand non-violent offenders.

The bad news is that the total incarcerated population--already the highest in the world by far--is still increasing, because the feds keep putting people away for very long stretches. Part of the problem is mandatory minimum sentencing laws, which shift power from judges to prosecutors. For any given set of facts, prosecutors have immense discretion in deciding what to charge people with. But once a guilty plea has been extracted, judges have very little discretion as to how long the sentence should be. So it is increasingly the prosecutor who decides how long your jail term will be. Since prosecutors like to notch up victories, this leads to overcrowded prisons.

An ex-felon I interviewed yesterday described how the prison in Forth Worth where he served time was so crowded that even when he was in solitary confinement, he had two cell mates.

[Comment \(16\)](#) [Recommend \(52\)](#) [E-mail](#) [Share](#) [Print](#) [Permalink](#)

## Ben Bernanke is lucky

Mar 19th 2010, 18:20 by Lexington

AMERICA'S central bank boss takes a lot of flak for his supposed role in failing to prevent the recession. North Korea's top monetary man takes [real bullets](#).

[Comment \(10\)](#) [Recommend \(32\)](#) [E-mail](#) [Share](#) [Print](#) [Permalink](#)

## The most powerful woman in American history

Mar 18th 2010, 18:06 by Lexington

I'VE written a profile of Nancy Pelosi, the House speaker, for this week's [column](#). Partly, this is a way of tackling health care without knowing whether or not a bill will pass. But she is also a fascinating figure in her own right.

I was in the Capitol on Monday watching her give a [press conference](#) promoting the bill. She used a pack of children and six American flags as a backdrop. She said that the three most important issues facing Congress were "our children, our children, our children". It was excruciating.

Not even Mrs Pelosi's closest allies would claim that she is a great orator. What she is good at is twisting arms and counting votes. In her [autobiography](#), she describes how she learned about politics as a child, by watching her father, the Mayor of Baltimore, run his favour-trading machine.

I found her book ("Know Your Power: A Message to America's Daughters") in the self-help section at Borders. Here are some morsels that didn't make it into the column:

- When she was seven and her dad was about to be sworn in as mayor, young Nancy and two of her brothers were accosted by a stranger who asked them if they were excited.

man turned out to be the outgoing mayor. Nancy's nine-year-old brother Joey threatened to tell Mommy that Nancy had been rude to the mayor. "If you do," she replied, "I'll tell Mommy that you talked to a stranger." Neither squealed. "I had just built my first strategic alliance," writes Mrs Pelosi. (p.15)

- When she first ran for Congress in San Francisco, her campaign manager warned her that a gay man would beat her. She retorted that Italian-Americans would vote for her, and she would win. She was right. (p.74)
- When she joined Congress, she often felt that female legislators were excluded and marginalised. It did not help that Capitol policemen often did not recognise her and told her she could not enter members-only parts of the building. One time, she was following a congressman she needed to talk to through a door when a guard said "You can't go there!" She declared: "I can go anywhere I want. I am a member of Congress." The guard replied sheepishly: "Congresswoman, that's the men's room." (p.144)

Comment (17)   Recommend (46)   E-mail   Share   Print   Permalink

## Ignoring the Birthers

Mar 17th 2010, 15:50 by Lexington

HAWAII is mulling a law aimed at slapping down the cranks who keep asking to see [Barack Obama's birth certificate](#):

*If the measure passed, the state Office of Information Practices could declare an individual a "vexatious requester" and restrict rights to government records for two years.*

This seems unwise. Granted, the birthers are both nuts and annoying. But according to the AP, Hawaii only gets 10 to 20 requests like this each week. I would have expected the number to be far higher.

These people are not going to go away just because you tell them to get stuffed. On the contrary, anything that smacks of stonewalling will inflame their conspiratorial minds. The AP quotes a lawyer called Peter Fritz who argues that there is no need to punish repeated requests for records, when the state could just politely say it will answer each person's question only once.

Comment (12)   Recommend (38)   E-mail   Share   Print   Permalink

## Tiger roars again

Mar 16th 2010, 21:22 by Lexington

TIGER WOODS will [return to golf](#) in April. He will play in the Masters, the scene of his [first major triumph](#).

Suddenly, it seems like spring is here.

Meanwhile, it is reported that the great man is getting back into his stride [in other ways](#).

Comment (4)   Recommend (44)   E-mail   Share   Print   Permalink

## In cyberspace, no one knows you're a Fed

Mar 16th 2010, 15:49 by Lexington

THE FBI hunt criminals in cyberspace. This should come as no surprise. Many criminals are so stupid that they post incriminating information on social-networking sites. For example, as AP [reports](#):

*Federal authorities nabbed a man wanted on bank fraud charges after he started posting Facebook updates about the fun he was having in Mexico.*

This echoes a [story](#) I blogged about last year:

*[P]olice in [High Point, North Carolina] were trying to figure out which local youths belonged to which street gangs and which gangs were involved in which types of crime.*

*It turned out that one of their most valuable sources of information was the gangs' own Facebook pages. Some gangbangers had posted pictures of themselves posing with guns, showing off their gang insignia and bragging about the money they were making. They also posted messages to each other, making it farcically simple for the police to figure out who was associated with whom.*

In principle, I have no problem with this kind of snooping. But there have to be rules. Under what circumstances, for example, is it OK for a police officer to impersonate someone else online? A watchdog group called the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) demanded, under the Freedom of Information Act, that various government agencies release their guidelines on the subject. This morning, it posted the

[response](#) from the Department of Justice on its website.

Different agencies have [different rules](#). The IRS, for example, "clearly prohibits employees from using deception or fake social networking accounts to obtain information." But

*[T]he good example set by the IRS is in stark contrast to the U.S. Marshals and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Neither organization found any documents...in response to EFF's request, suggesting they do not have any written policies or restrictions upon the use of [social-networking] websites.*

So if you are a teenager, and an online "friend" asks if there will be booze at your birthday party, just say no. In cyberspace, no one knows who's a Fed.

---

[Comment \(16\)](#)   [Recommend \(39\)](#)   [E-mail](#)   [Share](#)   [Print](#)   [Permalink](#)

---

## Another vacancy on the Supreme Court

Mar 15th 2010, 21:02 by Lexington

JEFF TOOBIN at the *New Yorker* has a thoughtful essay on [the likely retirement of Justice John Paul Stevens](#). Many observers of the court expect this to come soon; Justice Stevens tells Mr Toobin that he will make a decision in the next month.

As he nears his 90th birthday, Justice Stevens is still sharp—I listened to him gently but shrewdly grill lawyers half his age earlier this month. But he sounds tired, and he would clearly rather have Barack Obama appoint his successor than some future Republican president. (Though he was appointed by a Republican, Gerald Ford).

Mr Toobin's piece is full of nuggets:

*[W]hen [Chief Justice John] Roberts served as a law clerk to [the late Chief Justice] William H. Rehnquist, Stevens had already been a Justice for five years. He was the last nominee before the Reagan years, when confirmations became contested territory in the culture wars (and he was also, not coincidentally, the last whose confirmation hearings were not broadcast live on television). In some respects, Stevens comes from another world: in a recent opinion, he noted that contemporary views on marijuana laws were "reminiscent of the opinion that supported the nationwide ban on alcohol consumption when I was a student.*

Mr Toobin also reminds us of one of Justice Stevens' most inaccurate predictions. Rejecting Bill Clinton's argument that the Paula Jones case be postponed until after his presidency, he said that the case, if properly handled, seemed "highly unlikely to occupy any substantial amount of [President Clinton's] time".

Since Justice Stevens is solidly on the court's liberal wing and will undoubtedly be replaced by a liberal, some people will dismiss his retirement as of little consequence. This would be a mistake. His successor will probably be four decades younger than him, and appointments are for life.

---

[Comment \(9\)](#)   [Recommend \(53\)](#)   [E-mail](#)   [Share](#)   [Print](#)   [Permalink](#)

---

## What matters more: brains or blood?

Mar 12th 2010, 15:15 by Lexington

MICHAEL LIND of the New America Foundation has written a nice, short essay arguing that America should [favour skills rather than kinship ties](#) in deciding which immigrants to admit. The current system, he says:

*privileges immigrants who benefit from genetic relationships, while discriminating against potential immigrants from every region in the world who would contribute a great deal to American society but lack relatives in the U.S. It allows a small number of countries like Mexico and the Philippines to provide a disproportionate share of U.S. immigration, at the expense of much more populous countries like China and India. The family preference system even discriminates against individuals in the over-represented countries who are not fortunate enough to have American relatives.*

*In addition to being unfair, nepotism-based immigration harms the U.S. economy. Family-based immigration is dominated by less-skilled immigrants. They enter a labor market in which there was a glut of less-skilled labor even before the recession created the highest levels of mass unemployment since the Great Depression.*

I basically agree, but would add three points. First, it is not a simple "either/or" choice. The best and the brightest have extended families too, and are more likely to come if they have the option of bringing them. Second, America can absorb more migrants than it currently admits, so it would be possible (albeit politically very hard) to let in more

skilled migrants without reducing the number of family reunifications. Third, as Jim Manzi argues in National Affairs, [raw talent matters more than skill](#):

*[W]e should reconceptualize immigration as recruiting... [We should] set up recruiting offices looking for the best possible talent everywhere: from Mexico City to Beijing to Helsinki to Calcutta. Australia and Canada have demonstrated the practicality of skills-based immigration policies for many years. We should improve upon their example by using testing and other methods to apply a basic tenet of all human capital-intensive organizations managing for the long term: Always pick talent over skill. It would be great for America as a whole to have, say, 500,000 smart, motivated people move here each year with the intention of becoming citizens.*

---

Comment (17)   Recommend (67)   E-mail   Share   Print   Permalink

---

## It all comes down to abortion

Mar 11th 2010, 19:38 by Lexington

THIS week's column reflects on [faith, abortion and politics](#). When every vote counts, as in the tussle over health-care reform, every obstacle can seem decisive. That said, pro-life Democrats are proving an exceptionally tough obstacle to Obamacare.

More broadly, the exit polls in 2008 showed that religious and moral issues were not uppermost in voters' minds. But is this evidence that [such issues are becoming less important](#), as some argue? I'd like to think so, but I suspect it is simply that the economic crisis that year temporarily displaced them. We shall see.

Among the sources I found useful were:

"[To Change the World](#)", by James Davison Hunter (not yet released, but he gave me an advance copy).

"[Jesus Wars](#)", by Philip Jenkins.

A Pew report on [young people and religion](#). And another on how [many Americans mix multiple faiths](#).

---

Comment (12)   Recommend (59)   E-mail   Share   Print   Permalink

---

## God, gays and cultural imperialism

Mar 9th 2010, 16:33 by Lexington

AS MANY people have observed, the anti-gay bill being mooted in Uganda is pretty rough stuff. It proposes the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality" and jail terms for those who fail to inform on their gay neighbours.

Some observers claim that the bill was inspired by right-wing American preachers who have hoodwinked Africans into believing that they need to fight back against a western gay plot to homosexualise Africa. In "[Globalising the Culture Wars](#)", Kopya Kaoma claims that "As a direct result of this campaign [by American preachers such as Scott Lively], homophobia is on the rise in Africa."

[Phillip Jenkins](#), a British academic (and former winner of "Mastermind", a British TV quiz show), argues that this is bunk. Gay-bashing in Uganda was common long before any American preachers showed up and gave unpleasant speeches. Rivalry between Islam and Christianity for adherents ensures that preachers of both faiths compete to offer the most anti-gay vision, because that is what a lot of Ugandans want. As in many parts of Africa, openly gay people risk being lynched. The idea that Africans are passive puppets waiting to be told what to do by Americans is both wrong and insulting, says Mr Jenkins.

My guess is that Africans will eventually tolerate gays. It is not so long ago that gay sex was illegal in many Western countries. In the 19th century in Britain, it was punishable by death. Yet now you have a rapid proliferation of states and countries endorsing gay marriage. Africa is still a really hard place to be gay, but perhaps not forever.

Meanwhile, here's an article about [gay recruitment](#).

---

Comment (26)   Recommend (82)   E-mail   Share   Print   Permalink

---

## Is Obama good for Israel?

Mar 8th 2010, 23:05 by Lexington

I'M IN Miami, at a conference on religion and politics organised by the [Ethics and Public Policy Centre](#). The loudest fireworks so far have accompanied the discussion of Israel.

[David Gelernter](#) says Barack Obama is bad for Israel. The big issue is Iran, he argues, and Obama's policy has been one of "appeasement". His attempt to organise international sanctions to dissuade Iran from going nuclear cannot possibly be described as tough, he says. And if Iranian dissidents had thronged the streets during George W Bush's presidency, can you imagine him failing to express clear support for them? Professor Gelernter can't.

Rabbi [David Saperstein](#) retorts that Obama is a genuine friend of Israel. Last year, the US air force conducted an exercise with its Israeli allies that included the in-flight refueling of Israeli jets. That sends a powerful warning to Tehran. President Obama appointed one of the most pro-Israel senators as his vice-president. He criticised the Goldstone report. And what a great country is America, says Rabbi Saperstein, when a president called Barack Hussein Obama appoints as his chief of staff someone called Rahm Israel Emanuel?

Gelernter has a wide-ranging intellect. He is a Yale professor of computer science who also writes forcefully about religion and politics. He is personally brave, too. Ted Kaczynski (the Unabomber) posted him a bomb as part of his campaign against modern technology. It critically injured him, [blowing off his right hand](#).

But I'm not convinced by his argument.

UPDATE: Joe Biden [makes nice](#) in Israel.

---

[Comment \(13\)](#)   [Recommend \(79\)](#)   [E-mail](#)   [Share](#)   [Print](#)   [Permalink](#)

---

## The hot dog menace

Mar 5th 2010, 15:14 by Lexington

I HAVE long worried that we mainstream media scribes are pathetically out of touch. Now I have proof. According to Pew, the hottest topic in the blogosphere for the past week has been [the lethal peril of hot dogs](#). And the corporate media have completely missed the story. Apparently, we've all been so fixated on health reform and Greece's impending default that we've failed to spot the danger that is literally under our noses.

That said, my son did once choke on a hot dog at a pool party. When he was about five, the greedy little so-and-so tried to swallow one whole. When I noticed him turning red and asphyxiating, I turned him upside down and slapped his back until he coughed it up. It was fortunate, in retrospect, that my wife had taught me how to do this the previous week.

---

[Comment \(20\)](#)   [Recommend \(100\)](#)   [E-mail](#)   [Share](#)   [Print](#)   [Permalink](#)

---

## Angry white men

Mar 4th 2010, 19:32 by Lexington

THIS week's column looks at the gripes of white men. I was struck, as I drove around Tennessee and Arkansas last week, at how disgruntled the pale males were. Even those who said they sometimes or usually voted Democratic in Congressional elections were leaning towards pulling the lever for a Republican. It wasn't that they were in love with the GOP; merely that they were fed up with the party in power.

I don't think race is the main issue, though it's still there, as a rather [disagreeable exchange](#) with a shopkeeper in Tennessee makes clear. But apart from this gentleman, I didn't hear anyone say anything personally offensive about Barack Obama. The white men I spoke to were mostly worried about government spending, the economy and Mr Obama's supposedly weak-kneed approach to terrorism. I [don't agree](#) with all their complaints, but I don't doubt their sincerity.

The book I found most useful was David Paul Kuhn's "[The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic Dilemma](#)". I'm also indebted to him for digging into the Bureau of Labour Statistics numbers to discover just how hard the recession has hit blue-collar men, black and white. He wrote about it [here](#), and updated some of the numbers for me.

I also received a lot of help from our noble correspondent in Little Rock, so I'm going to give a gratuitous plug to her excellent book "[Sex in the South: Unbuckling the Bible Belt](#)". If you want to know what southerners with unconventional tastes get up to behind closed doors, this is the book for you.

UPDATE: A reader called "georgez" writes, in the comments section under my column, that the offensive quote in the first paragraph is "obviously" fabricated because the angry white man in question is not named. This puzzles me. If he thinks we would stoop to making up quotes, why does he read The Economist? For the record, the guy I quoted said his name was Ron Ackerman. He worked in a shop selling radio-controlled aeroplanes in Millington, TN. My editor cut his name out of the article to save space.

[Comment \(31\)](#) [Recommend \(110\)](#) [E-mail](#) [Share](#) [Print](#) [Permalink](#)

## "Converts threats to carpet stains"

Mar 4th 2010, 12:50 by Lexington

I'll say it up front. I think gun curbs are a good idea. I do concede, however, that the case for a right to bear arms in America has pretty solid constitutional foundations. I mean, it does say, right there in the text: "the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed".

This blog post, however, is not about the ins and outs of Second-Amendment jurisprudence. The gun-lovers outside the Supreme Court on Tuesday pointed me to a website full of colourful pro-gun posters, which I would like to share with you.

Here's the obligatory [English-bashing](#) one.

Here's one of the most effective slogans: "When seconds count, [cops are just minutes away](#)"

Here's a picture of a guy in a bathrobe with a [halberd](#).

Here's a cute one for the [kids](#).

And here's my [favourite](#).

UPDATE: My piece on the Chicago gun-rights case is now [posted](#).

[Comment \(42\)](#) [Recommend \(103\)](#) [E-mail](#) [Share](#) [Print](#) [Permalink](#)

## Rangel resigns

Mar 3rd 2010, 15:00 by Lexington

CHARLIE RANGEL is [stepping down](#) as head of the House Ways and Means Committee. At last. As I [wrote](#) in September, if Democrats want the country to acquiesce in a big expansion of government, they can't have a guy in charge of tax policy who appears not to have paid all the tax he owes.

[Comment \(15\)](#) [Recommend \(84\)](#) [E-mail](#) [Share](#) [Print](#) [Permalink](#)

## Why Ford failed

Mar 2nd 2010, 23:20 by Lexington

HAROLD FORD has an op-ed in the New York Times today explaining why [he will not run for the US Senate](#) from New York. My esteemed colleague at Democracy in America [dismisses](#) it as "exquisitely smarmy" and his exploratory campaign as "dismally tone-deaf". I'd be a bit kinder to the young carpet-bagger. I watched him on the stump when he ran for the Senate from Tennessee in 2006, and I'd say he has an immense political talent. What he lacks is somewhere to call home, and in politics that can be fatal.

In Tennessee, he was considered too socially liberal. I recall interviewing him with a Tennessean journalist who asked him a string of questions, all of which were about guns or hunting. That he only lost by a few points was, in retrospect, impressive.

When he moved to New York, he had the opposite problem. All the things he used to say to please crowds in Tennessee were still on record, and they made him sound, to liberal New Yorkers, like a knuckle-dragging right-winger.

Here's my [account](#) of Mr Ford trying to woo conservative Tennesseans in 2006:

*At [a] Kiwanis Club, where several members are boycotting his speech simply because he is a Democrat, Mr Ford boasts that he has never voted for an unbalanced budget, that he would never hire an illegal immigrant and that he gets "jumped on" a little by his own party because he goes to church a lot and loves Jesus.*

*This audience is not predisposed to like him, but they do. He says George Bush should have greater powers to thwart terrorists. He proposes to shut the borders to new immigrants for 45 days, to find out who's here and what they're up to. He wants to eliminate the tax code's bias against marriage—between a man and a woman, that is.*

I've no idea how much of this stuff he actually believed. In person, Mr Ford always struck me as bright and rather thoughtful. But some circles cannot be squared.

[Comment \(13\)](#) [Recommend \(86\)](#) [E-mail](#) [Share](#) [Print](#) [Permalink](#)



## Is a tap on the shoulder a violent crime?

Mar 2nd 2010, 17:22 by Lexington

I WAS in the Supreme Court this morning, covering a gun-rights case, of which more later. The session began with some opinions being delivered. Justice Antonin Scalia struck a small blow against the lamentable trend towards excessively harsh punishments for just about everything.

A guy from Florida called Curtis Johnson pleaded guilty to being a felon in possession of ammunition. Ordinarily, he would have received no more than ten years in jail for this, but prosecutors upped it to 15 by using the Armed Career Criminal Act (ACCA), which applies to those who have three previous convictions for a "violent felony".

Mr Johnson did not dispute that he had two such convictions. But the third one prosecutors cited was for simple battery in 2002. Under Florida law, that can mean any kind of unwanted touching, including a "ta[p]...on the shoulder without consent". This is normally a misdemeanor, but in Mr Johnson's case it became a felony because he had a prior conviction for the more serious crime of aggravated battery. The facts of the incident are unclear, since Mr Johnson copped a plea. But the court decided that he had not, in that 2002 case, been proven to have committed what a reasonable person would consider a violent crime.

No one is suggesting that Curtis Johnson is nice guy. By the sounds of it, he's a nasty piece of work. But if you are going to apply super-enhanced penalties, such as the 15-year mandatory minimum under the ACCA, the burden of proof needs to be high. Here's Mr Scalia's [opinion](#). Mr Alito's dissent is on page 16.

---

[Comment \(6\)](#)   [Recommend \(85\)](#)   [E-mail](#)   [Share](#)   [Print](#)   [Permalink](#)

---

## The view from a Wal-Mart parking lot

Feb 27th 2010, 0:21 by Lexington

"SAM WALTON had a good idea," says one of the customers outside the Wal-Mart in Forrest City, Arkansas. "Put everything in one place and sell it cheap." There is no better place to find a random sample of voters than a Wal-Mart parking lot. Pretty much everyone shops here, especially in the state that spawned the world's biggest retailer.

Black Arkansans, unsurprisingly, still feel that Barack Obama is their man. But every white guy I talk to in the Wal-Mart parking lot disapproves of the president. They don't say anything personally rude about him, but they sure don't like what he's doing to America. He "might bankrupt the country" with his "medical debacle", says one, adding that he "appears to be a bit of a socialist".

The issue of government spending comes up again and again. "I don't like the way they're giving away all that money," says Steve Roberts, a welder. "I think you should work for your money." Wal-Mart shoppers watch the pennies, it seems, and wish their government would do the same.

The local member of Congress, a Democrat called Marion Berry, is retiring this year. As our correspondent in Little Rock [describes](#) in this week's print edition, this makes it quite possible that a Republican will capture the seat. Mr Berry is the one who [slammed](#) President Obama for not taking seriously the threat to Blue Dog (ie, conservative) Democrats this year. He claims that when Blue Dogs told him they feared a repeat of the Republican landslide of 1994, Mr Obama replied that the "big difference" between now and 1994 was "You've got me." Either this was a joke or it was unbelievably obtuse.

For Democrats in conservative districts, Mr Obama has become a serious liability. Many of their constituents think the country is being run by the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, and would like to send more Republicans to Congress to restore some balance. And a surprising number of moderate-to-conservative Democrats are giving up without a fight. In Arkansas, two out of three Democratic House members are retiring. Just across the border in Tennessee, John Tanner, a founder of the Blue Dog coalition, is calling it a day. From Senator Evan Bayh in Indiana to Senator Byron Dorgan in North Dakota, the list goes on. This is going to be a tough year for Democrats. The only bright spot I can see is that David Paterson is going to stand aside and let someone less hopeless defend the [New York governorship](#) for Democrats.

---

[Comment \(86\)](#)   [Recommend \(88\)](#)   [E-mail](#)   [Share](#)   [Print](#)   [Permalink](#)

---

## When killer whales kill

Feb 27th 2010, 0:18 by Lexington



was so enchanted that she turned to me and whispered that she wanted to be a killer-whale trainer when she grows up.

On Wednesday, one of the killer whales at Sea World killed its trainer. It grabbed her by the ponytail and drowned her in front of a horrified audience. No one could rescue her because the orca was too big and aggressive. This is either the second or the third person it has killed.

The tragedy has led to a fierce [debate](#) as to whether killer whales should be kept in captivity. Some say the stress of confinement can turn them violent. Others shrug that playing with an enormous predator is inherently risky. The killer whale will not be euthanised--it's too valuable.

Either way, Little Miss Lexington is probably going to rethink her choice of career.

---

[Comment \(5\)](#)   [Recommend \(85\)](#)   [E-mail](#)   [Share](#)   [Print](#)   [Permalink](#)

---

## Spare the rod, damn the child

Feb 26th 2010, 15:09 by Lexington

AS I was driving through Arkansas yesterday, I saw a sign by the road urging me to beat my children in order to save their souls. This advice was well-supported with Biblical quotations. But I don't think Mrs Lexington will go along with it.

Unless, of course, Lexington junior attacks her with that infernal light sabre again.

UPDATE: More details about Christian child-chastisement [here](#). According to Michael and Debi Pearl, two rather enthusiastic preachers of discipline: "A proper spanking leaves children without breath to complain." And a length of plumbing supply line is a "real attention-getter".

---

[Comment \(20\)](#)   [Recommend \(83\)](#)   [E-mail](#)   [Share](#)   [Print](#)   [Permalink](#)

---

## Obama the warrior

Feb 25th 2010, 17:30 by Lexington

BACK at last from my holiday. The kids loved Disney more than words can say. Loading them onto the aeroplane home was like forcing pampered French aristocrats onto a tumbler.

This week's [column](#) addresses the conservative charge, repeated ad nauseam at CPAC last week, that Barack Obama is too weak to be commander-in-chief. This is bunk.

I had my [doubts](#) when he was dithering for ages over what to do in Afghanistan, but he has now picked a good strategy and seems bent on seeing it through.

Among the sources I found useful were:

- Some videos of [Barack-bashing](#) at CPAC
- "[After Iran Gets the Bomb](#)", an essay by James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh in *Foreign Affairs*
- And this [long list of complaints](#) from Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch about how President Obama's foreign policies are too ruthless

---

[Comment \(10\)](#)   [Recommend \(85\)](#)   [E-mail](#)   [Share](#)   [Print](#)   [Permalink](#)

---

## Reflections on the blizzard

Feb 13th 2010, 1:45 by Lexington

THE worst snow storm to hit Washington since records began has taught me a few things.

- I've been stuck in my house for a week now. This has made very little difference to my ability to do my job. I could not go anywhere or interview anyone face to face, but you can learn a lot with a phone and a broadband connection. If a falling tree had taken out our power, (as happened to many of my neighbours), it would have been a bit harder.
- I haven't received any snail mail for a week. This has made no difference to my life whatsoever. Glossy real-estate fliers aren't very absorbent. I prefer to stuff my wet boots with the Washington Post's Style section.
- The kids haven't been to school for a week. This makes a huge difference. After a few days cooped up together they start acting like the boys in "Lord of the Flies". We [previously created cannibals](#), but if the snowplough hadn't finally arrived yesterday, I

don't think we could have held out much longer.

- Reckless teenagers on snowboards and clueless three year olds on sleds, on the same slope, are a bad combination. Though my kids did think it amusing when a teenager went flying over his home-made ski jump and crashed into a low-hanging branch.

Anyway, that's it for now. I'm on holiday next week, taking the monsters to Disney World. They've never been before, but never cease reminding me that I have. I once went there to interview some corporate types, and was shown around by a helpful PR. That meant that I saw a bunch of things the kids never see. I entered the parks by the back door, where off-duty Mickeys and Donalds slouch, frown and smoke. It's hard work being wholesome and cheerful all the time.

[Comment \(20\)](#)   [Recommend \(83\)](#)   [E-mail](#)   [Share](#)   [Print](#)   [Permalink](#)

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 ... [next >](#) [last >](#)

**Classified ads**



[About Economist.com](#)   [About The Economist](#)   [Media directory](#)   [Staff books](#)   [Career opportunities](#)   [Contact us](#)   [Subscribe](#)

[\[+\] Site feedback](#)

Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2009. All rights reserved.   [Advertising info](#)   [Legal disclaimer](#)   [Accessibility](#)   [Privacy policy](#)   [Terms & Conditions](#)   [Help](#)