

# PIQUE

## Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

### July, 2007

Before our summer hiatus, we add more pages to PIQUE (your opinions solicited) ... offer humanist opinions on immigration and citizenship ... remind ourselves of the reasons we need reason and doubt in the *res publica*, and consider whether our republic is becoming Rome (complete with Praetorian Guard). We welcome a new Honorary Member, mix in some silliness, salute our city, trash Canada, and invite everyone to get up and dance—defiantly—in the summer streets. —*JR*

#### NO AUGUST ISSUE

Next month, the Editor of PIQUE, the local and national staff, and all our correspondents in all our bureaus worldwide will be on vacation.

#### HAPPY 14TH AMENDMENT DAY!

Garrett Epps

*(Excerpted from Salon.com, 7/22/06)*

What's better than a patriotic holiday in July? Pop a brew tonight, then, and let's celebrate our heritage of democracy and equal rights. We owe these freedoms not so much to the events commemorated every July 4, but to those of July 21.

On that day in 1868, after a bruising ratification struggle, Congress passed a resolution proclaiming that the 14th Amendment was part of the Constitution. More than the Declaration of Independence, more than the original Constitution, more than even the Bill of Rights, it is the 14th Amendment that makes America a democratic country.

But, as the beer commercials say, celebrate responsibly: Our current toxic immigration debate shows that, more than a century later, genuine democracy has powerful enemies. In 2006, the anti-immigrant movement is attacking the amendment's central meaning of equal protection of the law for all.

Please don't feel bad if the words "14th Amend-ment" don't immediately call to mind a list of rights. Most literate citizens — and even many lawyers — have trouble focusing on the radical changes this massive post-Civil War reform made in the original Constitution. The 14th Amendment is such a giant presence in our lives today that it's hard to see it as a single thing.

But consider this. Until the 14th Amendment, the idea of human equality, extolled in the Declaration of Independence, appeared nowhere in the Constitution. The word "equal," in the original document, referred mostly to voting privileges for the states. In addition, the Constitution contained no definition of American citizenship, seemingly leaving the matter to the states.

Even the Bill of Rights itself only covered the federal government — overreaching state governments could, and did, restrict free speech, freedom of religion, due process of law and other basic rights. In short, the Framers of 1787 set up a flawed confederation of insular states, each of which was free to oppress, and even enslave, some or all of its population.

No matter what we've been taught in civics class, that original system was a failure. Its flaws led directly to the bloodiest war in American history. After nearly a million deaths, the anti-slavery leaders of Congress set out in 1865 to re-create the United States as a nation, with a powerful central government, democratic institutions at every level and a list of rights no government, state or federal, could violate. Far more than the Framers of 1787, John Bingham, Thaddeus Stevens, William P. Fessenden and the other authors of the 14th Amendment designed the America we live in today. It was, in their vision, to be a unified nation. Local majorities in states were to be barred by federal power from oppressing religious, political or racial minorities. And immigrants were to be a part of the nation as fully as those native-born, considered equal before the courts.

The concerns that motivated them seem, even 140 years later, remarkably contemporary. The first section of the amendment begins by guaranteeing that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the U.S. and of the State wherein they reside." At one stroke, the framers eliminated the racist Dred Scott doctrine that "we the people" did not mean African-Americans; and they included as citizens every child born here, no matter where their parents were born or how they got here. After that, they required every state to observe the "privileges [and] immunities of citizens of the United States," and to afford due process and equal protection of the laws to "any person" within their borders.

Ohio Rep. John Bingham, principal architect of Section 1, had spent most of his career campaigning for the rights of slaves and immigrants. Before the Civil War, he had laid out a vision of "one people, one Constitution, and one country!" States had no "rights" to interfere with their citizens' constitutional rights: "The equality of the right to live; the right to know; to argue and to utter, according to conscience; to work and enjoy the product of their toil, is the rock on which [the] Constitution rests, its sure foundation and defense." Immigrants enjoyed those rights as fully as natives, he insisted, because the Constitution obeyed "that higher law given by a voice out of heaven: 'Ye shall have the same law for the stranger as for one of your own country.'"

The bedrock values of birthright citizenship and equal protection for all immigrants came directly out of the debates over immigration of the 1850s — debates that sound remarkably like the one going on in Congress today. By 1860, German-born immigrants to the United States totaled 1.2 million out of about 30 million total, and thousands of Irish were arriving yearly. Prophets of the "Know-Nothing" movement warned that these new immigrants were not like previous ones. They did not assimilate; they owed allegiance to the pope; they insisted on speaking their own languages; they would subvert American institutions and destroy American identity.

Even worse, they drank beer. Many proposals were floated to restrict their rights, requiring 21 years for citizenship or withholding the vote entirely. But anti-slavery Republicans like Bingham insisted that a free republic did not deal in hierarchies of rights.

Today's Know-Nothings are attempting to avoid this central tenet of American democracy by deliberately distorting the meaning of the 14th Amendment. On its Web site, the anti-immigrant Federation for American Immigration Reform dismisses the Citizenship Clause by saying it "was intended to exclude from automatic citizenship American-born persons whose allegiance to the United States was not complete" — including illegal immigrants.

But there is no shred of evidence in the record to support this strained interpretation. The wording of the clause was designed to exclude from citizenship chiefly the children of diplomats living in the United States under the protection of their countries of origin. And the proponents were utterly clear that birthright citizenship would reach American-born Chinese (whose parents were barred from naturalization) and Mexicans in the Southwest. ... History shows that new waves of immigration pose far less danger to America than do new efforts to cut back on democracy, or to institute new classes of citizens with, as the Supreme Court said in *Dred Scott*, “no rights a white man [is] bound to respect.”

Sometime between 1860 and today, beer stopped being an alien danger and became an American institution. So today, if you or your parents came to this country from another and gained citizenship; if your family moved from one state to another and received equal treatment in your new home; if you benefit from laws forbidding racial discrimination by government; if you are glad that your local cops can't arrest you without a warrant or reasonable cause and torture you until you “confess” to a crime; if you don't think censorship of the news by state and local government is a good idea; if you don't want Jim Sensenbrenner and Tom Tancredo deciding whether your American-born children “deserve” citizenship— then lift a stein to the 14th Amendment and the far-seeing legislators who wrote it.

### **CITIZENSHIP IS (AND SHOULD BE) A BIRTHRIGHT**

**Robert A. Murtha, Jr.**

The 14th Amendment of the United States constitution guarantees birthright citizenship to any person born within the United States and subject to its jurisdiction. At the time this was understood to include every person born within the United States except Indians subject to tribal jurisdiction and the children of Blue List diplomats who have diplomatic immunity. Indians were later given citizenship by the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. The U.S. born children of diplomats are given the presumption of legal residence but not citizenship.

Prior to the 14th Amendment, under the Common Law, citizenship of a state was vested by birth within its territory. A citizen of a state was a citizen of the United States by extension. The 14th amendment was intended to turn the presumption around, overturn the dreadful *Dred Scott* (US Supreme Court, 60, U.S. 393, 1856) decision that held that black people could never be citizens of the United States and prevent attempts by the states to restrict citizenship.

Then as now, the country was immersed in a contentious debate over immigration. Nativist “Know-Nothings” feared that the U.S. would be overrun by the “mongrel” Chinese race, drunken Papist Irish and beer-swilling Germans who could never become real Americans. They repeatedly attempted to rewrite and gut the 14th Amendment but were rebuffed.

The Nativists are still with us. They still want to restrict immigration, they still don't like the 14th Amendment and they want to get tough. The Amendment allows aliens, they say, to have “anchor babies” who can later sponsor them for permanent residence and in the meanwhile make it difficult for ICE (the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency) to deport them. Migrants, of course, don't come here to have babies. They come

to work. The babies then happen in the normal course of human life. Moreover, the babies cannot sponsor their parents until they are 21. It is hardly likely that anyone is having a baby now in 2007 on a theory that s/he will sponsor them in 2028. The babies will, of course, grow up to be ordinary Americans who will struggle and suffer like the rest of us, work and pay the taxes needed to keep our Social Security system afloat.

The 14th Amendment, the Nativists say, is not intended to include such people as undocumented aliens whose allegiance, they claim, is not complete. This argument is entirely specious because whatever his allegiance an alien in any country subjects himself to its jurisdiction. The United States has, in fact, jurisdiction over all aliens in its territory except foreign heads of state, foreign ministers, Blue List diplomats and comparable foreign dignitaries.

As a practical matter, denial of birthright citizenship has produced ugly results. In Germany, for example, there are hundreds of thousands of children of Turkish “guestworkers” who can become German citizens only with the greatest difficulty and are in any case, not accepted as Germans. The Germans have created an angry, disaffected underclass. We don’t need to do that. Switzerland is another bad example on a smaller scale. In Kuwait even the locally born grandchildren of their original guest workers are denied citizenship and can be thrown out of the country on a whim.

Pending legislation to amend the 14th Amendment (Ron Paul, R.-Texas) or otherwise revoke birthright citizenship (Nathan Deal, R.-GA) has not been approved by Congress and should not be. It would flatly contradict our nation’s constitutional history and traditions which have served us well and would be a huge victory for intolerance and restriction.

### **MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI IS ELECTED TO HONORARY MEMBERSHIP IN SHSNY**

*[Photo of Dr. Pigliucci]*

Dr. Massimo Pigliucci, botanist, philosopher and prolific writer on evolution, ethics, science education and politics, who has been reprinted many times in these pages, has been unanimously elected by the Board of the Secular Humanist Society of New York to Honorary Membership, and has graciously accepted.

Massimo Pigliucci, Ph.D., is a professor of Ecology and Evolution at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He received his doctorate in genetics at the University of Ferrara, Italy, a Ph.D. in botany from the University of Connecticut, and a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Tennessee.

He received the Dobzhansky Prize from the Society for the Study of Evolution, and has been awarded the Oak Ridge National Laboratories Science Alliance Faculty Research Award three times. He is a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry.

Dr. Pigliucci is the author of *Tales of the Rational: Skeptical Essays about Nature and Science* (2000); *Denying Evolution: Creationism, Scientism, and the Nature of Science* (2002), on the evolution-creation controversy, and why people have difficulties with critical thinking; and *Making Sense of Evolution: the Conceptual Foundations of Evolutionary Biology* (with Jonathan Kaplan, 2006), a philosophical examination of the fundamental concepts of evolutionary theory and practice.

He is also a regular contributor to *Free Inquiry*, *Skeptic*, *Skeptical Inquirer*, *Philosophy Now*, *The Philosopher's Magazine*, *Secular Nation* and *American Atheist*. His own website, [RationallySpeaking.org](http://RationallySpeaking.org), is one of the most interesting and provocative rationalist/humanist sites on the Internet — visit and see for yourself.

As an Honorary Member, Massimo Pigliucci joins writer/visionary Arthur C. Clarke; cognitive-behavioral therapist Albert Ellis; poet/historian Jennifer Michael Hecht; and “Skeptical Eye” columnist Leon Jaroff — about all of whom more details in a future issue.

## SCIENCE LITERACY ON EAST 23RD STREET

**Barbara Lifton**

I was running to find a cab on East 23rd street—of course wearing my “I Love Darwin” button—when a middle aged man dressed in a suit, and sporting a beard and yarmulke, called after me, “What does your button say?” I told him.

He called after me, even louder, “Who is Darwin?”

## THE VIRTUE OF DOUBT

**Peter Birkenhead**

*(Excerpted from “Better to be Hamlet than President George” on salon.com, 6/11/07)*

**“There’s no doubt in my mind ...”**

“... that each person who has been executed in our state was guilty of the crime committed.” — George W. Bush, June 2, 2000

“... that Saddam Hussein was a grave and gathering threat to America and the world.” — 1/28/04

“... that this country cannot [sic] achieve any objective we put our mind to.” — 4/20/04

“... we made the right decision in Iraq.” — 9/2/04

“... that Afghanistan will remain a democracy and serve as an incredible example.” — 1/5/06

“... [warrantless surveillance] is legal.” — 1/26/06

Remember good old doubt? When a capacity for self-doubt was a prerequisite for self-knowledge and a hallmark of maturity? To put it another way, can you imagine John F. Kennedy walking with the swagger of George W. Bush? Kennedy walked like what he was — a man in pain from injuries he suffered in an actual war, and he allowed himself to be photographed hunched over with worry during the Cuban missile crisis. That picture, now an iconic image of heroic doubt, is sadly anachronistic.

Forty-five years ago today, JFK, speaking to the graduating class at Yale, said, “The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived, and dishonest—but the myth — persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. ... Belief in myths allows the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.” He urged the students to “move on from the reassuring repetition of stale phrases to a new, difficult, but essential confrontation with reality.” Kennedy was urging the students not to let the establishment, which he represented, get away with anything. Submit its rhetoric to the fiercest scrutiny. Think for yourself. It was an invitation that reflected his own education in the wisdom of doubt. ...

We’ve forgotten how valuable, even vital, it is to be bravely unsure of ourselves. We’ve forgotten that doubt is the hill hope climbs, that without it our spirits atrophy.

You'd think that after the past six years we'd want some of JFK's brand of genuine bravery and capacity for doubt in our leaders, but most of the current candidates for president, with a few exceptions, like Barack Obama, John McCain and John Edwards, again sound like scared little children playing soldier. They puff up their chests and bray in the absolutist style of the guy who got us into the biggest mess of our lifetime. They clumsily and desperately make up facts, conflate enemies, and endorse the worst kinds of behavior, all to seem more certain than the next guy that evil is all around us. They present themselves as even less troubled by reality than our freedom-frying, deaf, dumb and blind dauphin. And at the same time they seem excruciatingly un-free, as if they're straining against the straitjackets of political convention.

Our current presidential candidates could do us all a favor and read the words of a president who had to wear a confining back brace every day and who would often wince in pain, slump with doubt, and exhibit all sorts of human flaws — but also gave the impression that he could swim three miles in the South Pacific if he had to, even in his suit and tie. Someone who stood up to the fear-mongers of his day with courageous doubt, who knew firsthand that the closest thing there is to absolute evil is absolutism itself.

## **THE ASSAULT ON REASON**

**Al Gore**

*(Excerpted from his new book, The Assault on Reason)*

Why do reason, logic and truth seem to play a sharply diminished role in the way America now makes important decisions? The persistent and sustained reliance on falsehoods as the basis of policy, even in the face of massive and well-understood evidence to the contrary, seems to many Americans to have reached levels that were previously unimaginable.

It is too easy—and too partisan—to simply place the blame on the policies of President George W. Bush. We are all responsible for the decisions our country makes. We have a Congress. We have an independent judiciary. We have checks and balances. We are a nation of laws. We have free speech. We have a free press. Have they all failed us? Why has America's public discourse become less focused and clear, less reasoned? Faith in the power of reason—the belief that free citizens can govern themselves wisely and fairly by resorting to logical debate on the basis of the best evidence available, instead of raw power—remains the central premise of American democracy. This premise is now under assault. ...

It is simply no longer possible to ignore the strangeness of our public discourse. I know I am not alone in feeling that something has gone fundamentally wrong. In 2001, I had hoped it was an aberration when polls showed that three-quarters of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was responsible for attacking us on Sept. 11. More than five years later, however, nearly half of the American public still believes it.

At first I thought the exhaustive, nonstop coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial was just an unfortunate excess — an unwelcome departure from the normal good sense and judgment of our television news media. Now we know that it was merely an early example of a new pattern of serial obsessions that periodically take over the airwaves for weeks at a time: the Michael Jackson trial and the Robert Blake trial, the Laci Peterson tragedy and the Chandra Levy tragedy, Britney and KFed, Lindsay and Paris and Nicole.

While American television watchers were collectively devoting 100 million hours of their lives each week to these and other similar stories, our nation was in the process of more quietly making what future historians will certainly describe as a series of catastrophically mistaken decisions on issues of war and peace, the global climate and human survival, freedom and barbarity, justice and fairness. For example, hardly anyone now disagrees that the choice to invade Iraq was a grievous mistake. Yet, incredibly, all of the evidence and arguments necessary to have made the right decision were available at the time and in hindsight are glaringly obvious. ...

Our Founders' faith in the viability of representative democracy rested on their trust in the wisdom of a well-informed citizenry, their ingenious design for checks and balances, and their belief that the rule of reason is the natural sovereign of a free people. The Founders took great care to protect the openness of the marketplace of ideas so that knowledge could flow freely. Thus they not only protected freedom of assembly, they made a special point—in the First Amendment—of protecting the freedom of the printing press. And yet today, almost 45 years have passed since the majority of Americans received their news and information from the printed word. Newspapers are hemorrhaging readers.

Reading itself is in decline. The Republic of Letters has been invaded and occupied by the empire of television. Radio, the Internet, movies, cell phones, iPods, computers, instant messaging, video games and personal digital assistants all now vie for our attention – but it is television that still dominates the flow of information. According to an authoritative global study, Americans now watch television an average of 4 hours and 35 minutes every day — 90 minutes more than the world average. When you assume eight hours of work a day, six to eight hours of sleep and a couple of hours to bathe, dress, eat and commute, that is almost three-quarters of all the discretionary time the average American has.

In the world of television, the massive flows of information are largely in only one direction, which makes it virtually impossible for individuals to take part in what passes for a national conversation. Individuals receive, but they cannot send. They hear, but they do not speak. The “well-informed citizenry” is in danger of becoming the “well-amused audience.” ...

In practice, what television's dominance has come to mean is that the inherent value of political propositions put forward by candidates is now largely irrelevant compared with the image-based ad campaigns they use to shape the perceptions of voters. The high cost of these commercials has radically increased the role of money in politics — and the influence of those who contribute it. That is why campaign finance reform, however well drafted, often misses the main point: so long as the dominant means of engaging in political dialogue is through purchasing expensive television advertising, money will continue in one way or another to dominate American politics. And as a result, ideas will continue to play a diminished role. That is also why the House and Senate campaign committees in both parties now search for candidates who are multimillionaires and can buy the ads with their own personal resources. ...

The potential for manipulating mass opinions and feelings initially discovered by commercial advertisers is now being even more aggressively exploited by a new generation of media Machiavellis. The combination of ever more sophisticated public opinion sampling techniques and the increasing use of powerful computers to parse and

subdivide the American people according to “psychographic” categories that identify their susceptibility to individually tailored appeals has further magnified the power of propagandistic electronic messaging that has created a harsh new reality for the functioning of our democracy.

As a result, our democracy is in danger of being hollowed out. In order to reclaim our birthright, we Americans must resolve to repair the systemic decay of the public forum. We must create new ways to engage in a genuine and not manipulative conversation about our future. We must stop tolerating the rejection and distortion of science. We must insist on an end to the cynical use of pseudo-studies known to be false for the purpose of intentionally clouding the public’s ability to discern the truth. Americans in both parties should insist on the re-establishment of respect for the rule of reason.

### **WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH US?**

On Friday, June 8, the day the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was fired while the U.S. was at war in two different countries ... a Baghdad police chief’s wife and children were among 50 people killed in one of those countries ... a U.S. congressman was indicted for corruption ... a space shuttle was launched into orbit ... the compromise immigration bill died in the Senate ... the G8 conference in Germany ended with a promise from world leaders of \$60 billion to combat AIDS, a Russian compromise proposal on a missile defense system, and the American president sickened with a stomach virus ... American commercial television devoted all-day coverage—including hour-long “Special Reports”—to the re-incarceration (and subsequent finding of God) in Los Angeles of a super-rich blonde celebrity whose fame is based on her performance in an amateur porn film.

### **ARE WE ROME?**

**Walter Isaacson**

*(Excerpted from “The Empire in the Mirror,” a review of Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America, by Cullen Murphy, in The NYTimes Book Review, 5/13/07)*

*[Picture of Roman soldier with spear and shield]*

The only sure thing that can be said about the past is that anyone who can remember Santayana’s maxim is condemned to repeat it. As a result, the danger of not understanding the lessons of history is matched by the danger of using simplistic historical analogies. Those who have learned the lessons of Munich square off against those who have learned the lessons of Vietnam, and then they both invoke the bread-and-circus days of the overstretched Roman empire in an attempt to sound even more subtle and profound.

In his provocative and lively *Are We Rome?* Cullen Murphy provides these requisite caveats as he engages in a serious effort to draw lessons from a comparison of America’s situation today with that of imperial Rome. Founded, according to tradition, as a farming village in 753 B.C., Rome enjoyed 12 centuries of rise and fall before the barbarians began overwhelming the gates in the fifth century. During that time it became a prosperous and sometimes virtuous republic and then a dissolute and corrupt empire that was destined to be mined for contemporary lessons by historians [since] Edward Gibbon,



whose first volume of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was fittingly published in the British empire in 1776.

There are almost as many causes cited for Rome's collapse as there are historians. But the general sense is that the empire became too fat, flabby and unwieldy. As Gibbon put it, "prosperity ripened the principle of decay." Rome's decline came to be viewed with an air of tragic inevitability fraught with resonance. As Byron wrote in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: "There is the moral of all human tales; / 'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past, / First Freedom, and then Glory — when that fails, / Wealth, vice, corruption — barbarism at last."

The most salient comparison between modern America and classical Rome, as Murphy notes, is that both have been blessed, and afflicted, with a sense of exceptionalism. In America this begins with John Winthrop exhorting his Puritan flock, who were about to settle the Massachusetts Bay Colony, "that we shall be as a city upon a hill." Since then various presidents have described the United States in words that echo Cicero's description of the Romans and their shining city upon seven hills: "Spaniards had the advantage over them in point of numbers, Gauls in physical strength, Carthaginians in sharpness, Greeks in culture, native Latins and Italians in shrewd common sense; yet Rome had conquered them all and acquired her vast empire because in piety, religion and appreciation of the omnipotence of the gods she was without equal."

In Rome, the virtues of a republic were originally sustained by selfless leaders and warriors like Cincinnatus, who took up a sword to save the city but, when the battles were won, put it aside to take up a plow again. In both the reality and the lore of America's founding, George Washington played that role. But Rome eventually became dominated by fixers, flatterers and bureaucrats who clung to power. Murphy, the editor at large at *Vanity Fair*, offers up comparisons with the city of Washington today that are provocative, if at times a bit stretched. He pokes at putative panegyrists like Midge Decter on Donald Rumsfeld, and he compares the Roman undercover operatives, the *curiosi*, to the eavesdropping programs of the National Security Agency. He even likens the marvels of Rome's sewer system to the effluence to be found on the Internet: "Washington now drains into the blogosphere, another engineering marvel."

The military strategist Edward Luttwak, in his 1976 book *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, examined how Rome's legions protected its frontiers. His thesis was that during the late stages of their empire the Romans resigned themselves to the fact that barbarian invaders would penetrate the borders. So cities began to wall themselves in, and "the provision of security became an increasingly heavy charge on society." At the same time, the idea of citizen-soldiers drawn from all ranks of Roman society — including the educated and upper classes—gave way to legions that were hired and dragooned from the poor and from immigrants.

Similarly, Murphy worries about the toll the post-9/11 security apparatus is taking on America at a time when members of the educated elite no longer feel it their duty to serve in the military. He reports that 450 of the 750 graduates in the Princeton class of 1956 served, whereas only eight of the 1,100 in the class of 2004 did. America has begun contracting out many security functions to private companies, much as Rome farmed out its security to barbarian mercenaries. The problems that result are exacerbated when America tries to impose its values and institutions in distant lands. Drawing on the great reporting of others ... Murphy shows the absurdities that occur in places like Baghdad

when the proconsuls and legions and contractors we send have no clue about the people they are dealing with.

Even in its prime as a republic, Rome had a web of patronage among the connected elite. Later, Pliny the Younger was the master of the patronage letter, repeatedly asking the emperor for favors. But by the empire's declining years, the concept of suffragium, which had originally meant "ballot," then the exerting of influence, had evolved into a word for outright bribery. Here Murphy has a target that is almost too easy. He quotes some of the e-mail of the lobbyist Jack Abramoff exhorting contributions from his clients, which does not stand up favorably to Pliny the Younger's letters. *"You iz da man! Do you hear me?! You da man!! How much \$\$ coming tomorrow? Did we get some more \$\$ in?"* ...

Laudably, Murphy ends on some optimistic notes, and some prescriptions, rather than wallowing in declinism. "An empire remains powerful so long as its subjects rejoice in it," the Roman historian Livy wrote. To that end, Murphy suggests, America needs to instill in its citizenry a greater appreciation for the rest of the world. At home, it should resurrect the ideals of citizen engagement and promote a sense of community and mutual obligation, rather than treating most government as a necessary evil. With its capacity to innovate and reinvent itself, and with its faith in progress, America need never become as stagnant as Rome. "The genius of America," Murphy concludes, "may be that it has built 'the fall of Rome' into its very makeup: it is very consciously a constant work in progress, designed to accommodate and build on revolutionary change."

## **OUR OWN PRAETORIAN GUARD**

**Chris Hedges**

*(Excerpted from "What if Our Mercenaries Turn on Us?" in The Philadelphia Inquirer, 6/03/07, and posted on TruthOut.org 6/04)*

*[Photo of Blackwater mercenary with assault rifle]*

Armed units from the private security firm Blackwater USA opened fire in Baghdad streets twice in two days last week. It triggered a standoff between the security contractors and Iraqi forces, a reminder that the war in Iraq may be remembered mostly in our history books for empowering and building America's first modern mercenary army.

There are an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 armed security contractors working in Iraq, although there are no official figures and some estimates run much higher. Security contractors are not counted as part of the coalition forces. When the number of private mercenary fighters is added to other civilian military "contractors" who carry out logistical support activities such as food preparation, the number rises to about 126,000.

...

The privatization of war hands an incentive to American corporations, many with tremendous political clout, to keep us mired down in Iraq. But even more disturbing is the steady rise of this modern Praetorian Guard. The Praetorian Guard in ancient Rome was a paramilitary force that defied legal constraints, made violence part of the political discourse, and eventually plunged the Roman Republic into tyranny and despotism. Despotism movements need paramilitary forces that operate outside the law, forces that sow fear among potential opponents, and are capable of physically silencing those

branded by their leaders as traitors. In the wrong hands, a Blackwater could well become that force.

American taxpayers have so far handed a staggering \$4 billion to “armed security” companies in Iraq such as Blackwater, according to House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chairman Rep. Henry Waxman (D., Calif.). Tens of billions more have been paid to companies that provide logistical support. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D., Ill.) of the House Intelligence Committee estimates that 40 cents of every dollar spent on the occupation has gone to war contractors. It’s unlikely any of these corporations will push for an early withdrawal. The profits are too lucrative.

Mercenary forces like Blackwater operate beyond civilian and military law. They are covered by a 2004 edict passed by American occupation authorities in Iraq that immunizes all civilian contractors in Iraq from prosecution.

Blackwater, barely a decade old, has migrated from Iraq to set up operations in the United States and nine other countries. It trains Afghan security forces and has established a base a few miles from the Iranian border. The huge contracts from the war—including \$750 million from the State Department since 2004—have allowed Blackwater to amass a fleet of more than 20 aircraft, including helicopter gunships. Jeremy Scahill, the author of *Blackwater: The Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army*, points out that Blackwater has also constructed “the world’s largest private military facility — a 7,000-acre compound near the Great Dismal Swamp of North Carolina.” Blackwater also recently opened a facility in Illinois (“Blackwater North”) and, despite local opposition, is moving ahead with plans to build another huge training base near San Diego. The company recently announced it was creating a private intelligence branch called “Total Intelligence.”

Erik Prince, who founded and runs Blackwater, is a man who appears to have little time for the niceties of democracy. He has close ties with the radical Christian Right and the Bush White House. He champions his company as a patriotic extension of the U.S. military. His employees, in an act as cynical as it is dishonest, take an oath of loyalty to the Constitution. But what he and his allies have built is a mercenary army, paid for with government money, which operates outside the law and without constitutional constraint.

Mercenary units are a vital instrument in the hands of despotic movements. Communist and fascist movements during the last century each built rogue paramilitary forces. And the appearance of Blackwater fighters, heavily armed and wearing their trademark black uniforms, patrolling the streets of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, may be a grim taste of the future. In New Orleans Blackwater charged the government \$240,000 a day. “‘It cannot happen here’ is always wrong,” the philosopher Karl Popper wrote. “A dictatorship can happen anywhere.”

The word “contractor” helps launder the fear and threat out of a more accurate term: “paramilitary force.” We’re not supposed to have such forces in the United States, but we now do. And if we have them, we have a potential threat to democracy. On U.S. soil, Blackwater so far has shown few signs of being an out-and-out rogue retainer army, though they looked the part in New Orleans. But were this country to become even a little less stable, outfits like Blackwater might see a heyday. If the United States falls into a period of instability caused by another catastrophic terrorist attack, an economic meltdown that triggers social unrest, or a series of environmental disasters, such paramilitary forces, protected and assisted by fellow ideologues in the police and

military, could ruthlessly abolish what is left of our eroding democracy. War, with the huge profits it hands to corporations, and to right-wing interests such as the Christian Right, could become a permanent condition. And the thugs with automatic weapons, black uniforms and wraparound sunglasses who appeared on the streets in New Orleans could appear on our streets.

**THE FIRST AMERICAN ARMY:  
NOT MERCENARIES – “GENTLEMEN”**

**David Hackett Fisher**

*(Excerpted from “Continental” in Washington's Crossing)*

This gentleman of Virginia [Washington] was learning to treat a brigade of New England Yankee farm boys and fishermen as men of honor, who were entitled to equality of esteem. That attitude had already begun to spread throughout the army. In 1776, American officers addressed even their lowliest privates as gentlemen. No other army in the world operated on such a principle. Europeans were startled to observe it at work in America ... “all are called gentlemen and ladies.” Here was a new idea of a gentleman, a moral condition rather than a social rank. It was also a new idea of honor, which was not defined by rank or status or gender, but by a principle of human dignity and decency.

**THE GREATEST AMERICAN ARMY:  
NOT MERCENARIES – “CITIZEN SOLDIERS”**

**Stephen Ambrose**

*(From the conclusion of his book, Citizen Soldiers)*

Although the GIs [of World War II] were and are embarrassed to talk or write about the cause they fought for, in marked contrast to their great-grandfathers who fought in the Civil War, they were the children of democracy and they did more to help spread democracy around the world than any other generation in history.

At the core, the American citizen soldiers knew the difference between right and wrong, and they didn't want to live in a world in which wrong prevailed. So they fought, and won, and we all of us, living and yet to be born, must be forever profoundly grateful.

**FLOCK**

**Billy Collins**

*It has been calculated that each copy of the  
Gutenberg Bible required the skins of 300 sheep.*

I can seem them  
squeezed into the holding pen  
behind the stone building  
where the printing press is housed.

All of them squirming around  
to find a little room  
and looking so much alike  
it would be nearly impossible to count them.

And there is no telling which one of them  
will carry the news  
that the Lord is a Shepherd,  
one of the few things  
they already know.

*Billy Collins was U.S. Poet Laureate from 2001 - 2003, and has been the New York State Poet Laureate since 2004.*

### **WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #5.3**

While crime increased nationwide 1.3 percent last year, it *fell* 5.3 percent in New York City, and ours is still the safest big city in the U.S., with fewer crimes per 100,000 residents than any other, according to the F.B.I.'s preliminary crime report for 2006. What's more, Police Commissioner Kelly says crime has fallen an additional 8.5 percent in the first seven months of this year.

So, for all those New York-haters who are positive we are Godless Sodom on the Subway, we have a two-word greeting, and it's not "Happy Birthday."

### **WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #286**

Art Harris went to his local public library May 29 to reserve a copy of atheist Christopher Hitchens's new book, *God Is Not Great*. The clerk at the desk took his name and said: "You're 286th in line."

### **AMERICAN POLITICIANS AREN'T THE ONLY SCIENCE ILLITERATES (AND IDIOTS)**

*(FromThisIsTrue.com, 5/27)*

Canadian Member of Parliament Mike Lake says the sasquatch (Bigfoot) should be protected as an endangered species. He presented a petition from his constituents asking "to establish immediate, comprehensive legislation to effect immediate protection of Bigfoot" ... under Canada's Species at Risk Act.

*That's hardly necessary; their population count is exactly the same as it always has been.*

### **DANCE, DANCE, REVOLUTION**

**Barbara Ehrenreich**

*(Reprinted from the Op-Ed page of The NYTimes, 6/3/07, and based on Ms. Ehrenreich's new book, Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy)*

Compared with most of the issues that the venerable civil liberties lawyer Norman Siegel takes up, this one may seem like the ultimate in urban frivolity: Late last month, he joined hundreds of hip-hoppers, salsa dancers, Lindy Hoppers and techno-heads boogying along Fifth Avenue to protest New York City's 80-year-old restrictions on dancing in bars.

But disputes over who can dance, how and where, are at least as old as civilization, and arise from the longstanding conflict between the forces of order and hierarchy on the one hand, and the deep human craving for free-spirited joy on the other.

New York's cabaret laws limit dancing to licensed venues. They date back to the Harlem Renaissance, which had created the unsettling prospect of interracial dancing.

For decades, no one paid much attention to the laws until Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, bent on turning Manhattan into a giant mall/food court, decided to get tough. Today, the city far more famous for its night life than its Sunday services has only about 170 venues where it is legal to get up and dance — hence last month’s danced protest, as well as an earlier one in February.

Dust-ups over dancing have become a regular feature of urban life. Dance clubs all over the country have faced the threat of shutdowns because the dancing sometimes spills over into the streets. While neighbors annoyed by sleepless nights or the suspicion of illegal drug use may be justified in their concerns, conflict over public dancing has a long history — one that goes all the way back to the ancient Mediterranean world.

The Greeks danced to worship their gods – especially Dionysus, the god of ecstasy. But then the far more strait-laced Romans cracked down viciously on Dionysian worship in 186 B.C., even going on to ban dancing schools for Roman children a few decades later. The early Christians incorporated dance into their liturgy, despite church leaders’ worries about immodesty. But at the end of the fourth century, the archbishop of Constantinople issued the stern pronouncement: “For where there is a dance, there is also the Devil.”

The Catholic Church did not succeed in prohibiting dancing within churches until the late Middle Ages, and in doing so perhaps inadvertently set off the dance “manias” that swept Belgium, Germany and Italy starting in the 14th century. Long attributed to some form of toxin—ergot or spider venom—the manias drove thousands of people to the streets day and night, mocking and menacing the priests who tried to stop them.

In northern Europe, Calvinism brought a hasty death to the old public forms of dancing, along with the costuming, masking and feasting that had usually accompanied them. All that survived, outside of vestiges of “folk dancing,” were the elites’ tame, indoor ballroom dances, fraught, as in today’s “Dancing with the Stars,” with anxiety over a possible misstep. When Europeans fanned out across the globe in the 18th and 19th centuries, the colonizers made it a priority to crush the danced rituals of indigenous people, which were seen as savagery, devil worship and prelude to rebellion.

To the secular opponents of public dancing, it is always a noxious source of disorder and, in New York’s case, noise. But hardly anyone talks about what is lost when the music stops and the traditional venues close. Facing what he saw as an epidemic of melancholy, or what we would now call depression, the 17th-century English writer Robert Burton placed much of the blame on the Calvinist hostility to “dancing, singing, masking, mumming and stage plays.” ...

The need for public, celebratory dance seems to be hardwired into us. Rock art from around the world depicts stick figures dancing in lines and circles at least as far back as 10,000 years ago. According to some anthropologists, dance helped bond prehistoric people together in the large groups that were necessary for collective defense against marauding predators, both animal and human. While language also serves to forge community, it doesn’t come close to possessing the emotional urgency of dance. Without dance, we risk loneliness and anomie.

Dancing to music is not only mood-lifting and community-building; it’s also a uniquely human capability. No other animals, not even chimpanzees, can keep together in time to music. Yes, we can live without it, as most of us do most of the time, but why not

reclaim our human heritage as creatures who can generate our own communal pleasures out of music and dance?

This is why New Yorkers—as well as all Americans faced with anti-dance restrictions—should stand up and take action; and the best way to do so is by high stepping into the streets.

“If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be in your revolution.”

— *Emma Goldman, atheist and anarchist revolutionary.*

### **BAN THE BIBLE?**

More than 800 Hong Kong residents have called on authorities to reclassify the Bible as “indecent” due to its sexual and violent content.

The complaints follow the launch of an anonymous Web site—[www.truthbible.net](http://www.truthbible.net)—which said the book “made one tremble” given its sexual and violent content, including rape and incest, and that the Bible’s sexual content “far exceeds” that of a recent sex column published in the Chinese University’s *Student Press* magazine, which had asked readers whether they’d ever fantasized about incest or bestiality.

If Hong Kong’s authorities do classify it as “indecent,” only adults over 18 will be allowed to buy the Bible — sealed in a (we assume plain) wrapper with a statutory warning notice.

### **EVOLUTIONARY THEORY: STICKIER THAN PEANUT BUTTER**

#### **Flash Light**

Two articles in June *PIQUE* appear to contradict each other. From “Sociable Darwinism,” excerpted from Natalie Angier: “In Wilson’s view ... Unlike quantum mechanics or the general theory of relativity, the basic concepts behind evolutionary theory are easy to grasp.”

Compare “Peanut Butter, The Atheist’s Nightmare,” which demonstrates that creationists, who think evolution predicts new life will appear in peanut butter jars, have not grasped “the basic concepts behind evolutionary theory.”

The latter reflects my experience: every time I’ve had a discussion with a creationist, I’ve realized s/he misunderstands evolutionary theory. We not only need to teach evolution in public schools; we need to do a better job of it.

### **TELL US WHAT YOU THINK**

This member newsletter needs more letters from the members to the Editor like the above. We need your ideas, your opinions, your scattered thoughts (scattered thoughts are why evolution produced editors), your reasoned arguments and your intemperate rants.

To make yourself heard (and read), write to the SHSNY P.O. box (Page 1) or, better, send an email to [john@rafferty.net](mailto:john@rafferty.net).