

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May, 2009

Should America legalize drugs? Is the Vatican sensitive and merciful? Is prayer a good idea as your airplane goes down? Should secular humanists stop calling pious crooks ... um, “crooks?” Should we believe something, anything, even if it’s wrong? Is “zero tolerance” really zero intelligence? And can Libertarianism really bring forth on this continent a brave new and unregulated world? Answers inside. But first, is torture ever American? Answer right here: No. — JR

## SHAME

John Rafferty

I have read “US Torture: Voices from the Black Sites,” by Mark Danner in the April 9 New York Review of Books\*, and I have accessed and read the “ICRC Report on the Treatment of Fourteen ‘High Value Detainees’ in CIA Custody\*\*” by the International Committee of the Red Cross, on which Danner’s article is based, and I was made sick to my stomach. I could as easily have been reading a report of practices in the basement chambers of Stalin’s Lubyanka prison.

I am an American, and I am ashamed.

The ICRC Report makes it clear: senior American military officers and even American doctors authorized and participated in the systematic and brutal torture of prisoners. That’s no longer a supposition, it’s a fact known by almost everyone. The prisoners know they’re being tortured; so do their comrades in al Qaeda and other groups. The governments of the countries to which we have “renditioned” hundreds of prisoners know prisoners are being tortured; they’re doing it. The whole international community knows we’ve been torturing; the Red Cross report proves what everyone has known for years – in sickening detail.

“Everyone knows” – except the American public. We were fed the official “We don’t torture” line and the “just a few rotten apples” excuse for years by the Bush administration, and now are being told that a real, independent investigation into torture by Americans would weaken us in the “war on terror,” hurt America’s standing in the world, expose Americans to arrest and trial by international tribunals – and anyway, is just a liberal ex-post-facto smearing of Bush, Cheney, et al.

No, it is not.

This is about what America is and who we Americans are. If torture was official American policy, authorized at White House or cabinet levels, then, as Senator Patrick Leahy, Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has said,

*“We need to get to the bottom of what happened – and why – so we make sure it never happens again.”*

Let a conservative who’s a lot smarter than me make the reasons-why argument, below.

\*[www.nybooks.com/articles/22614](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22614)

\*\*[www.nybooks.com/icrc-report.pdf](http://www.nybooks.com/icrc-report.pdf)

## **THE TORTURE REPORT**

**Andrew Sullivan**

*(From The Daily Dish on atlantic.com, 4/7/09)*

It's been another huge day of data-gathering in the years-long bid to get to the bottom of the secret and illegal torture program set up by Bush and Cheney as their central tool in the war on Jihadist terrorism. You can download the leaked – and devastating International Committee of the Red Cross report. You can read about the chilling similarities between the Bush-Cheney techniques and those used by the Soviet gulag. You can read more details of how doctors were implicated in monitoring and measuring the torture of human beings. If you need confirmation that this new data is real and dispositive, then go read the partisan right blogs. Their total radio silence tells you something.

But Mark Danner's superb piece, after years of superb reporting, comes to an important conclusion that we should not miss. It is that we need to put all the data on the table – including both the precise techniques and who authorized and perpetrated them and also the alleged intelligence gains from the program. Danner sees why this latter point, which I have also endorsed, is so important. Until we can examine the claims from Cheney et al. that torture saved lives, we will never be able to remove the danger of a president reinstigating torture on the same basis in the future. The GOP is not ashamed of using this as a political weapon. Cheney has all but declared that without torture, America cannot be safe. Gingrich is reiterating that. Rove tried to run the 2006 election on the question of who has the balls to torture terror suspects more brutally. Unless we have clear data that can judge these claims, we cannot dispositively prevent a recurrence.

I should be clear. I oppose all such torture as illegal and criminal and immoral even if tangible intelligence gains were included in the morass of lies and red herrings that we got. But if torture advocates really do insist that America needs to embrace this evil if it is to survive, then we need to see and judge the evidence that they keep pointing to off-stage. We need a real and thorough and definitive investigation. If Cheney is right, he has nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of. And the Congress should move to withdraw from the Geneva Conventions, withdraw from the UN Torture Treaty, amend domestic law to enshrine torture, and allow future presidents of the U.S. to torture suspects legally.

More sunlight please. Let us have this debate in full and in detail. And soon – before it is too late.

### **IN AMERICA'S MOST PERILOUS STRUGGLE, “A POLICY OF HUMANITY”**

*(Excerpted from Washington's Crossing, by David Hackett Fischer)*

An American policy on prisoners emerged after the battle of Trenton [in 1776]. Washington ordered that Hessian captives would be treated as human beings with the same rights of humanity for which Americans were striving. The Hessians expected a different fate [because of butcheries of American prisoners by the Hessians and British] ... they were amazed to be treated with decency and even kindness. ...

The same policy was extended to British prisoners after the battle of Princeton. Washington ordered one of his most trusted officers to look after them: “You are to take charge of [211] privates of the British Army. ... Treat them with humanity, and Let them

have no reason to Complain of our Copying the brutal example of the British army in their treatment of our unfortunate brethren. ... Provide everything necessary for them on the road." ... Congress and the Continental army generally adopted John Adams' "policy of humanity." Their moral choices in the War of Independence enlarged the meaning of the American Revolution.

The most remarkable fact about American soldiers and civilians in the New Jersey campaign is that they did all of these things at the same time. In a desperate struggle they found a way to defeat a formidable enemy, not merely once at Trenton but many times in twelve weeks of continued combat. They reversed the momentum of the war. They improvised a new way of war that grew into an American tradition. And they chose a policy of humanity that aligned the conduct of the war with the values of the Revolution.

They set a high example, and we have much to learn from them.

## **HARD DRUGS: A SOCIAL CANCER**

**George Rowell**

*In response to "We Are Addicted to Fake Outrage," by David Sirota, and "We Can't Win The War on Drugs," by Alvaro Vargas Llosa, both in April, 2009 PIQUE.*

It is time these wobbly rationalizations for decriminalization and legalization of drugs get much needed refutation. Hard drugs are a danger and peril to any society, can destroy it and can destroy us. We must fight them and their use by all means possible.

Has anyone been keeping up with the news from Mexico and Columbia? Here we see two societies being destroyed by drugs before our eyes.

If drugs were legalized in America and Europe would the drug lords disband their armies of killers and thugs? No way. They would be extremely happy and probably really start to expand their drug business. They would probably find Canada and Scandinavia lacking enough sales, and step up business in those countries.

And what about methamphetamine? Most labs in the U.S. seem to be in the Midwest, the prairie states and the West. I always thought these decent people were too practical and sensible for such nonsense. What has happened to our beloved heartland? Note: these labs are a native product, not imported. If drugs were legalized, would every little town in the Midwest and West end up with meth shops among their barber shops and diners? Middle American would sink into pits of violence and drug stupor.

Here is an example of a drug problem you may have heard of: a teenage boy visits his grandmother and steals money from her pocketbook to buy illegal drugs from a dealer down the street. Family dissension and breakdown ensue. Hard drug use may be called a "private vice," but it spreads like a cancer to family and society.

Now suppose that boy lives in a drug-permissive society. He can buy his hard drugs from the drug store down the street. But ... where does he get the money? I don't think grandmother is going to say, "Here's money for your cocaine, dear." People don't think about this. The money must come from somewhere; he may have to steal from grandmother anyway.

We are in a position like grandmother. The money stolen from our pocketbooks must come from somewhere. It comes from the labor of honest men and women working for a living, but it is not a tax. A tax, we know, supports services for the whole state. Drug money is a tax on a tax, to serve the vices of the few. More like a cancer, it is a mass of parasitic cells, gradually devouring the healthy ones.

And consider the wrecked health and lives of drug addicts, which vary, of course, from drug to drug and amount of addiction, but the “health” of the addicts’ families is also affected. Following that, of course, the health of society is threatened. And the addict himself, if he doesn’t die, is no longer a contributing member of society, but a ward of society. And let us not forget, drug users are always proselytizing others to join the “faith.”

So we must fight drug use by every means possible, or our society will disintegrate. I am sure many secular humanists grew up in towns and neighborhoods where no hard drugs or addicts threatened social tranquility. We must aim for that again. We may need stronger police and legal systems than we have now, but this is immensely preferable to an anarchic, disintegrating, drug-ridden society.

### ***Response***

Mr. Rowell ignores the facts that drug use has not increased significantly in those European countries and cantons that have relaxed their drug laws; there is no proof (only unfounded speculation) that drug use would increase significantly in America if we relaxed our laws; and that we (America alone) have been spending \$40 billion a year since the Nixon administration on a policy of “stronger police and legal systems” that not only doesn’t work, but that actually creates the profit opportunity for the Columbian and Mexican drug lords. How many billions more does our society lose in terms of drug-related crime and the cost of imprisoning offenders? If drugs were legal and safe in America, they’d be orders-of-magnitude cheaper, bringing down our crime rates and the multi-billion-dollar yearly cost of incarcerating even first-time “felons” for possession of a couple of joints.

Here’s a suggestion for a society-wide social experiment: legalize marijuana, which is non-addictive (take it from someone who knows), tax it and supervise its production and distribution to make sure it’s safe.

The probable downside: some more people who would not have smoked weed will, and the same bluenoses who would ban alcohol, tobacco and pre-marital sex will scream that America is in its death throes.

The probable upside: marijuana will actually deliver millions in tax revenues to our coffers; the Columbian and Mexican drug lords (and the American thugs at the American end of the distribution chain) will be out of the pot business; and we’ll save billions in enforcement and incarceration costs – some fraction of which we’ll use to discourage consumption, just as we do with cigarettes.

If that’s too much to expect from an American public that has been sold on the idea that we only have to “get tougher,” let just a few willing states—Hawaii, California, Oregon, New York and Vermont come to mind—try the experiment and see what happens. — *JR*

## **OUR NATION’S NARCOTICS POLICY IS DRUG-FUELED MADNESS**

**David Sirota**

*(Reprinted from salon.com, 4/4/09)*

Finally, a little honesty. Finally, after America has frittered away billions of taxpayer dollars arming Latin American death squads, air-dropping toxic herbicides on equatorial farmland, and incarcerating more of its own citizens on nonviolent drug charges than any

other industrialized nation, two leaders last week tried to begin taming the most wildly out-of-control beast in the government zoo: federal narcotics policy.

It started with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stating an embarrassingly obvious truth that politicians almost never discuss. In a speech about rising violence in Mexico, she said, “Our insatiable demand for illegal drugs fuels the drug trade,” and then added that “we have co-responsibility” for the cartel-driven carnage plaguing our southern border.

She’s right, of course. For all the Rambo-ish talk about waging a war on drugs that interdicts the supply of narcotics, we have not diminished demand – specifically, demand for marijuana that cartels base their business on.

According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, Americans spend about \$9 billion a year on Mexican pot. Add that to the roughly \$36 billion worth of domestically produced weed, and cannabis has become one of the continent’s biggest cash crops. As any mob movie illustrates, mixing such “insatiable” demand for a product with statutes outlawing said product guarantees the emergence of a violent black market – in this case, one in which Mexican drug cartels reap 62 percent of their profits from U.S. marijuana sales.

That last stat, provided by the White House drug czar, is the silver lining. Every American concerned about Mexico’s security problems should be thankful that the cartels are so dependent on marijuana and not a genuinely hazardous substance like heroin.

Why? Because that means through pot legalization, we can bring the marijuana trade out of the shadows and into the safety of the regulated economy, consequently eliminating the black market that the cartels rely on. And here’s the best part: We can do so without fearing any more negative consequences than we already tolerate in our keg-party culture.

Though President Barack Obama childishly laughed at a question about legalization during his recent town hall meeting, his government implicitly admits that marijuana is safer than light beer. Indeed, as federal agencies acknowledge alcohol’s key role in deadly illnesses and domestic violence, their latest anti-pot fear mongering is an ad campaign insisting—I kid you not—that marijuana is dangerous because it makes people zone out on their couches and diminishes video-gaming skills.

(This is your government on drugs: Cirrhosis and angry tank-topped luses beating their wives are more acceptable risks than stoners sitting in their basements ineptly playing “Halo.” Any questions?)

Despite this idiocy, despite polls showing that most Americans support some form of legalization, and despite such legalization promising to generate billions of dollars in tax revenue, Clinton only acknowledged the uncomfortable reality about demand. That’s certainly no small step, but she did not address drug policy reform. Confronting that taboo subject was left to Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va. Last week, this first-term lawmaker proposed creating a federal commission to examine potential changes to the prison system, including a relaxation of marijuana statutes.

Webb hails from a conservative-leaning swing state whose criminal justice laws are among the nation’s most draconian, so there’s about as much personal political upside for him in this fight as there is for Clinton — that is to say, almost none. That isn’t stopping him, though.

“The elephant in the room in many discussions of the criminal justice system is the increase in drug incarceration,” he said in a speech, later telling the Huffington Post that pot legalization “should be on the table.”

Finally, a little honesty — now, maybe, some action.

## **HOW UNBIASED AND ENLIGHTENED ARE WE SECULAR HUMANISTS?**

**Irv Millman**

The people I have most admired in my social as well as in my working life are those who are open-minded, liberal thinkers who are able to weigh ideas and offer judgments based on facts, reason and tolerance. That is why I was attracted to SHSNY, where I am proud to serve as a member of the board.

I like PIQUE because, generally speaking, its articles reflect attitudes which I admire. However, a recent article (“Jews, Faith & Bernie Madoff,” by Art Harris, PIQUE, April, 2009) in the publication troubles me because it reflects an attitude that I believe is at odds with what SHSNY stands for or (in my view) should stand for. In it the writer, Art Harris says:

*“Over many years my experiences have taught me that the more religious a person one finds, the more likely one finds a hypocrite and a thief.”*

Come on, now! Does that sound like a statement from a non-biased, enlightened individual?

It is sad and surprising to me that Mr. Harris, whom I know personally as a fine and intelligent gentleman, seems to have bought into and internalized the stereotype which anti-Semites have spouted throughout the ages: the Jew as Crook.

Being Jewish himself, Art most certainly does not think of himself as biased when he brings the example of Bernie Madoff as the epitome of crookedness. But a crook is a crook is a crook, no matter whether he (or she) professes a religion—any religion—or none!

And while we are against the promotion of their fantasies and superstitions, religious people are no more prone to illegal behavior than anybody else.

PIQUE, as the voice of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, should be above printing this kind of over-the-top anti-religious raving. There is no basis in fact or in reason for this kind of generalization; it seems more in tune with the kind of rhetoric expounded by the opponents of free thought, the ardent worshippers of prejudice and superstition. What statements like the one quoted above do is to bring into question the credibility of our movement.

And while, obviously, we are against the State’s supporting religious activism—the separation of Church and State is of paramount importance—it is absurd to deny that some of the work that religious groups are engaged in is indeed charitable and essential.

Let us just steer clear of our own biases and expound instead the values that we secular humanists stand for.

## **WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #55**

During a February 10 debate over abortion in the Missouri House in Jefferson City, Rep. Bryan Stevenson, a Webb City Republican, critical of the extent of federal authority

exercised in the Freedom of Choice Act suggested by some Congressional Democrats, announced that:

*“What we are dealing with today is the greatest power grab by the federal government since the War of Northern Aggression.”*

## IS EVOLUTIONARY THINKING UNNATURAL?

**Jesse Bering**

*(Excerpted from “Creationism Feels Right, but that Doesn’t Make it So,” in “Bering in Mind” on SciAm.com, 3/19/09)*

Many people believe that one’s acceptance of evolutionary theory boils down to whether that person was indoctrinated as a child by religious parents or educated by science-minded teachers. But it’s not that simple. By her own accounts, even Helen Keller, who was deaf and blind from nineteen months of age, spontaneously pondered, “Who made the sky, the sea, everything?” prior to being taught how to communicate. As a retrospective anecdote, the example should be taken with a pinch of salt, as they say—but if true, it’s quite something, since her linguistic isolation meant that Keller hadn’t a culturally transmitted concept of God to revert to but nevertheless intuited “someone” had created the world.

For the past decade, University of Michigan psychologist Margaret Evans has been investigating why creationist thinking comes more easily to the human mind than does evolutionary thinking. “Persistence [of creationist beliefs] is not simply the result of fundamentalist politics and socialization,” writes Evans. “Rather, these forces themselves depend on certain propensities of the human mind.” According to Evans, the preponderance of creationist beliefs—as well as their recalcitrance in the face of logical science—is due in large part to the way our cognitive systems have (ironically enough) evolved.

As a scientist, Evans isn’t so much interested in the metaphysical question of ultimate origins, but rather in the cognitive factors that influence and constrain our ability to think and reason about this existential problem. In her very important research, she’s been mapping out how children’s reasoning about origins are influenced by particular developmental experiences. ...

Evans has discovered that regardless of their parents’ beliefs or whether they attend religious or secular school, when asked where the first member of a particular animal species came from (say, a fox or a turtle), 5- to 7-year-old children give either spontaneous generationist (e.g., “it got born there”) or creationist (e.g., “God made it”) responses. By 8-10 years of age, however, children from both secular and religious backgrounds give exclusively creationist answers. Typically these answers are manifest as “God made it,” but often “Nature” is personified, seen as a deliberate agent that intentionally made the animal. It’s only among the oldest children she’s studied, the 10-12-year-olds, that Evans uncovers an effect of developmental experience, with children of evolutionary-minded parents giving evolutionary responses and those of evangelical parents giving creationist answers to the question.

In *Why Creationism is Here to Stay*, Evans states that “the theory of evolution is not something that arises intuitively, but rather requires a specific knowledge structure.” In other words, thinking like an evolutionist is hard work because, ironically, it works against the grain of evolved human psychology. Evolutionists will probably never

outnumber creationists, Evans believes, since the latter have a paradoxical ally in the way natural selection has lent itself to our species' ability to reason about its own origins. ...

There's a very specific cognitive glitch that invades our rationalist thought whenever we're pondering the subject of life's origins, something those who do research in this area refer to as "teleo-functional thinking" (reasoning about the functional purpose of an entity or object in question). When scratching our heads over an artifact—with the end product before us, asking ourselves how it came to be — these scientists find that we tend to start off by trying to deduce what it's meant for. If you've ever puzzled over an ambiguous gadget at the Sharper Image or some archaic device at the antique store or museum, asking yourself, "I wonder what that's supposed to be for?" this is an example of your teleo-functional reasoning in action. Many times the various physical or architectural features of the object, what are called its "affordances," give us clues as to its inherent purpose, or in other words what the designer of the object had in mind when creating it. An object with a handle, for instance, is meant for holding, while one with a hook is meant for hooking, and so on, and we interact with the object accordingly.

One thing you may also have noticed is that when we can't figure out the purpose of something to our satisfaction, it can be very, very frustrating. ...

It could be that, as University of California at Berkeley psychologist Alison Gopnik suggests, this object and its elusive purpose serves as something of a sexual tease, only it's not semi-naked and giving that come hither look inasmuch as it's wearing the cognitive chastity belt of a brainteaser.

Gopnik argues that human beings have evolved an "innate explanatory drive" that motivates us to seek explanations similar to the way we're motivated to achieve sexual climax. That is to say, for the sheer thrill and phenomenological bliss of it. Just as those few seconds in bed or on top of the washing machine feel naturally grand and put a smile on your face, so too does lighting upon that fleeting eureka moment in solving a mind-tickling problem leave you glowing. (OK, so maybe doing crosswords or Sudoku isn't going to have you exactly biting your bottom lip and moaning in ecstasy, but you get the gist of Gopnik's analogy.)

Physiologically speaking, says Gopnik, your brain is rigged up to chase these short-lived moments of pleasure: orgasm in the one instance because sex is nature's feel-good ruse to get your genes out there, and explanation in the other because knowing why things work the way they do enables you to learn and therefore to make more adaptive responses in the future. The thing is, Gopnik points out, your explanation doesn't actually need to be correct to get that burst of pleasure; you've just got to believe you've solved the problem. ...

One important point made by researchers working in this area is that teleo-functional reasoning invokes our social cognition because it has us guessing what the person who'd originally conceptualized the object intended it to be used for. "Oh I see," we'll say, rotating some mysterious contraption in our hands and finally recognizing some hidden function for one of its doohickeys or thingamajigs, "how clever." Of course for artifacts, or for that matter anything intentionally manmade, this type of thinking makes sense. People are indeed very clever at designing new objects that have a functional purpose. In fact one could even say we're ingenious at devising solutions to problems this way.

Just over the past few decades, more than 600 original patents have been awarded for bidets and bidet-related accessories and 400 for products meant to improve your



croissant-baking skills. But when applied to human origins, Darwin's mindless machine of natural selection obviates the need for an intelligent designer. Somebody needs to explain this to Rick Warren!

As far as I know, the type of psychological research and theories described above haven't been given much consideration in the endless 'intelligent design' debates eating up the clock at many lively school board meetings. But since it shows how our minds give the Book of Genesis a generous (and rather unfair) handicap in science education dialogue, it may be wise to table such findings for discussion.

**WE HAVE A FEW MORE SUGGESTIONS  
FOR A SHSNY GODLESS BUS AD SLOGAN**

*God rules the world. How do you like it so far?* — Irv Millman

*Fear created the gods.*— Bob Dickhoff

*God isn't dead; He never existed.* — Lee Loshak

*Thinking is better than believing.* — Giddian Beer

*Dare to disbelieve.* — Christine Wagner

Now, does anyone have a spare \$58,875 to put one of the above (or any of the 36 others suggested in April PIQUE) on the side of 75 Manhattan buses?

No? How about \$16,500 to put (much smaller) posters on the backs of those same buses?

\$4,050 for interior bus cards in 225 buses?

**WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #1:  
BECAUSE IT JUST KEEPS GETTING BETTER**

[pic of Limbaugh with huge cigar]

Rush Limbaugh, in a tirade on his radio show against New York taxes, announced that he was vacating the state immediately, that he would sell his NYC condominium and visit the state as little as possible, and predicted:

*"I'm not coming back. New York is probably going to celebrate that I'm not going to come back."*

The party's in full swing, Rush.

**GOING SOMEWHERE? TRY NOT  
TO BOOK ON TUNINTER AIRLINES**

Pilot Chafik Garbi was sentenced to seven years in prison by an Italian court in March, holding him responsible for the death of 16 people in the crash of his Tuninter TR-72 turboprop off Sicily in 2005.

Six other executives and employees of the airline also received sentences, but the court held the Tunisian pilot primarily responsible for the deaths because when his plane ran out of fuel he panicked and, instead of instituting emergency procedures, he prayed.

**THE SENSITIVE, COMPREHENSIBLE,  
MERCIFUL VATICAN**

Remember that Brazilian archbishop who excommunicated the doctors who performed a legal abortion on a 9-year-old girl who had been raped and impregnated with twins by her stepfather (PIQUE, April, 2009)?

Well, the Vatican, in its infinite wisdom and mercy, overturned the archbishop's judgment, saying only doctors who "systematically" performed abortions would be consigned to eternal hellfire.

The Vatican's top bioethics official, explaining the church's change of heart, said "the credibility of our teaching took a blow as it appeared, in the eyes of many, to be insensitive, incomprehensible and lacking mercy."

*Gee, you think?*

### **MOHAMMED REFLECTS ON THE EASTER SEASON JUST PAST**

**Mohammed:** Easter is rather confusing. Let me see if I have this right — the humans you created so displeased you that you had to have yourself crucified before you could let them have a relationship with you again. Then they put your temporarily dead body in a cave where you chilled for a couple of days before coming back to life as a magical bunny rabbit that lays chocolate eggs.

**Jesus:** Now that's just silly.

**Mo:** Which bit?

**Letters:** *Three correspondents take on Chic Schissel's March-issue take on Wayne Whitmore's February essay, "Libertarianism: Rooted in Reason."*

### **WHICH LIBERTARIANISM?**

**Charles Kleupfel**

Re: "Libertarianism: Rooted in Reason?" by Chic Schissel (PIQUE, March, 2009), of course one reason that Chic Schissel might "have never had a clear understanding of what is meant by 'Libertarian-ism'" [as defined by Dr. Wayne Whitmore in February PIQUE] is that Libertarianism is no more monolithic than humanism. Don't judge a limited-government libertarian by the ideology of the anarchist libertarian. The question is how "severely" maximization of individual liberty is limited by the addition of "under a rule of law."

Dr. Schissel sets up some straw men in suggesting that liberty would be maximized by allowing unlicensed drivers on the road or allowing drivers to go through red lights. On the contrary, my liberty to pursue my life unharmed is promoted by these reasonable restrictions on liberty, following a utilitarian course of a small limitation on liberty being more than balanced by the greater liberty to travel on the roads unscathed.

Dr. Schissel says that "no one is all knowing and all wise and capable of making intelligent decisions in every area." True enough, but are politicians in Washington better able to judge the need for medical marijuana than is the cancer or HIV patient who can't hold down his other medications without it? Is a person unfit to decide for himself what to ingest? I'm all in favor of barring smoking in public places, maximizing my liberty to breathe air that I consider clean, but drug bans assume the bureaucrat knows a person's body better than the person himself, or that person's doctor.

And what about assisted suicide? Isn't a person's life his or her own possession to do with as he or she sees fit? Is a doctor deciding on an individual basis, or a politician making a blanket decision for everyone, better qualified to determine an individual patient's state?

Surely the safety of dentistry or medicine can depend on accreditation organizations, rather than the government. In many cases, government licensing procedures are used by incumbent practitioners in a field to keep out competition, imposing irrelevant requirements on entry into a profession. The most notorious of these is the requirement for persons who braid hair professionally to obtain full beautician licenses. This keeps people who want to work from doing so. And why? Presumably to protect people from being burned by harsh chemicals that an unlicensed beautician might use (really?). But these people just want to braid hair, that's all. That's not dangerous. Also consider that anyone at all can color a friend's or relative's hair for free without state interference. Is that dangerous? I don't think so.

Speaking of free vs. paid: women may have many good or bad reasons for having sex with a particular person, but the only one (other than coercion) banned by the state is monetary compensation. You say there's human trafficking. Yes, but there's also human trafficking in household help; should that be banned as a profession? It's a dangerous profession: of course, the practitioners are living outside the reasonable protection of the law. It's degrading: those who practice it consider it less degrading than cleaning someone else's toilets. Women do it only because forced to do so by economic necessity? That's true of many jobs, both low- and high-paying.

The state can also declare your perfectly safe property to be "blighted" and "condemned," and force you to sell to a developer, at a price that certainly is below what you would have required, otherwise there'd be no reason for this abuse of eminent domain.

So of course there should be laws against murder, theft, fraud and assault. There should be quality-of-life regulations against smoking in public or making too much noise. There should be specifications of arbitrary standards such as red-means-stop-green-means-go, and the labeling requirements for hazardous materials. But deciding how safe one is to be is up to the individual, as to what is best to ingest, whether or not to take up sky diving or bungee jumping or any other area where my action does not foreseeably harm someone else. Professional organizations can guide the choice of doctors, dentists and auto manufacturers. Then it should be up to you how you want to balance thrift with quality and safety.

## **GOVERNMENT IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR REASON**

### **Milt Verstandig**

I think that we atheists are often prone to an error that I once again observe in the contribution by Dr. Chic Schissel in March PIQUE. Simply stated, there is a tendency to substitute a "worldly religion" for the supernatural one of which we are skeptical.

For instance, he states "No one is all-knowing and all-wise and capable of making intelligent decisions in every area, and the government reasonably steps in to protect us from stupid action." This one sentence contains a contradiction in logic. If man is not all-knowing, then a government, composed of those same men, is equally not all-knowing, and is equally incapable of "making intelligent decisions in every area." A cursory reading of history demonstrates the absurdity of belief in this fallacy all too clearly and tragically.

In fact, the above statement only makes sense if one thinks of the government as a substitute for a God. All-wise men and women, not subject to prejudice, power lust, turf

battles, corruption, vanity, etc., will lead us to overcome our weak human frailties. They have an unerring understanding of The Truth. But this is the language of religion. The priesthood consists of government leaders and bureaucrats, with the President as worshipped Leader, a secular Pope. People get so excited when their candidates win elections, convinced that all will be wonderful. They are the true believers in this religion. In addition, there are specialized members of this clergy, such as doctors, who have their own religious language, their own libraries of knowledge forbidden to the laity, who control medicines people are allowed to take, because they are perceived in this religion as Holy Men, not service providers.

This substitute religion has rules that prevent us from harming ourselves, as Dr. Schissel desires. The most pervasive one today is the war on drugs. The Priesthood determines what substances we are permitted to consume, which require their approval (prescriptions), and what the punishment will be if we violate their sacred Edicts. In this belief system, we have surrendered our freedom to the Priestly Elite.

This false premise leads to questionable conclusions. Thus there is support for licensing of professionals, which means that our Rulers determine whom we may hire to provide services. Since licensing has long been known to be the result of active campaigns by trade groups to raise the incomes of their members by excluding outsiders, the embrace of this false religion leads to harmful consequences. In this case, costs are increased, alternatives may not be tried, and minorities are prevented from entering such occupations as cosmetology due to roadblocks put in their way by licensing laws. Over 800 occupations are currently licensed in one or more states. (Certification by professional groups is the solution, as it preserves freedom of choice.)

Since we all make mistakes like this in our thinking (guilty as charged), I want to bring this one to the reader's attention. We skeptics are vulnerable to them, as we seek a substitute for the false comforts provided by supernatural-based religions. But this belief in the infallibility of powerful government is a dangerous error. If a person makes an error, it mostly affects him and those close to him; if a government makes an error, it often adversely affects millions.

## **INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS ARE THE CORE PRINCIPLE OF LIBERTARIANISM**

**Wayne G. Whitmore, M.D.**

The summary that appeared in the February issue of PIQUE of the talk I gave this past fall on Libertarianism and its place in our Constitutional republic has created some confusion as cited by Chic Schissel in March PIQUE. Like many terms, libertarianism can and does mean different things to different people who actually think about political philosophy. Libertarianism ranges from total anarchy (what I would call the "radical" libertarianism of David Friedman in *The Machinery of Freedom* and the Tannehills in *The Market for Liberty*) to a government limited by individual rights as envisioned in our Declaration of Independence and framed in our Constitution. I agree with the latter view.

When I spoke of the "rule of law," I was referring to the enforcement of honesty and non-aggression in the trading of goods, services and private property by individuals (e.g., honoring contracts). This would naturally encourage and reward independence, integrity, productiveness and benevolence as it did for more than a century in our country before politicians felt government could do it better. Any force or aggression used to control the

person or property of one individual against his will, by another individual (or group of individuals or government) would be against libertarian principles and would be considered “breaking the law.” However, this does not mean that the government can not make laws restricting certain actions dangerous to other individuals on public property (such as going through a red light, or driving without a license). This is an issue of property rights and not individual rights.

Although it may be hard to conceive of how people would survive if dentists and physicians were not “licensed,” there are actually very reasonable and convincing expositions for not licensing. Guilds existed in this country before we had licensure laws, as did some of the medical/surgical specialty “boards” of today. The licensing of hair-stylists and flower arrangers, shows how far our governments (state and local in this case) have gotten out of hand in this regard. Licensing causes restraint of trade, greatly increasing costs and restricting people’s freedom of choice for those services or as potential providers of those services. Protection for individuals, of course, comes from obtaining justice in our courts which would punish or provide recompense for dishonesty, theft, physical abuse, assault, malpractice, etc. The enforcement of “contract” in the exchange of goods and services (from the simple to the complex) would ultimately result in higher standards for service and better quality for goods.

Of course, without individual property rights (the core principle of libertarianism), particularly the right of property in our own person (self-ownership), but also property over the fruits of one’s own labor, no other rights really matter: the government gets to decide what it may do to you or take from you as an individual for the “General Welfare.” Our Founding Fathers appreciated the ideal of individualism and tried to protect us from tyranny in our new government, having just fought to free themselves from another. The imperfections of the Constitution have allowed politicians to erode our individual liberty over the past century while at the same time making us slaves of the state through the income tax. Without the “Bill of Rights,” which is steadily being emasculated, we would be a “true” democracy in short order with all of us, as individuals, at the mercy of the majority. This is mob rule, worst exemplified by the lynch mob. As individuals, we need to come to the aid of our republic by voting for politicians who are respectful of the principles embodied in our founding documents or we shall continue to lose our liberty. It is careless for us to vote for politicians who promise to give us anything that is at someone else’s expense.

## **THE FALSE GOD OF THE LIE**

### **Parcival**

*(Excerpted and edited from The Voice of Sanity, newsletter of Upstate South Carolina Humanists, April 2009)*

A while back I was out with a very attractive Baptist woman who persisted in going on about all things wrong with her ex-husband. After about an hour, I asked, “What really annoyed you about your ex?” She startled me when she said, “He disillusioned me.” I did, perhaps, the wrong thing and let out a great laugh and asked her, “But what greater gift can one give another than to free him from his illusions?” She got mad and emphatically stated, “I don’t want to give up my illusions, my beliefs about the world are sacred to me. They are the things that make me me.”

Now I have told this story a great many times and I have been surprised to learn that most of the responses I get back side with the angry girl. People don't want to give up their beliefs about themselves and the world. The churches drive this home: "Your belief is your salvation" ... "Whatever you do, hold on to your belief, never give it up" ... "The most important thing in the world is your faith; never change it, better to die as a martyr to your faith than give it up and suffer eternal damnation."

I say beliefs are simply hardened opinions. Every-one has opinions. The question is, can we change our opinions? ... Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart, why? So he was justified in further punishing Pharaoh with more curses. This god does not like free will. Poor Pharaoh, he was punished not because he was defiant but because god was. Martin Buber said, "Evil begins with the insistence on affirmations independent of all evidence." Beliefs may be fine for children but adults making adult decisions on whom to bomb next should base those decisions on facts rather than opiates.

As children, many of us were taught that religion and politics are not subjects for polite conversation. We are told that people have powerful feelings in these areas and disagreements are likely to result. The fact that there is so much free floating projection and anger associated with these subjects indicates a high level of illusion and unconsciousness. The areas of the priest and the king are off limits to us common folk and shall not be questioned.

For hundreds of generations, people have adopted their parents' religion and politics, never questioning why they believe what they believe. They are obedient little children who surround themselves with like-minded people to assure themselves of how right they are. This is why all the monotheistic religions are so querulous. To accept another's right to worship at another church would mean I would have to question my beliefs and I am not prepared to do that. A man who worships an irritable, jealous Old Testament god of destruction is telling the world exactly what kind of man he is. One would do well to avoid this "Christian" when he demands your soul, lest one risk seeing his real nature.

The real danger here is that much of our culture is based on this unconscious model of forcing every knee to bow to my will as if it were god's will. Two thousand years of killing unbelievers as "evildoers" have not made the world a safer, more blessed place. These are dangerous times and the world remains in bondage to a demon more destructive than the devil. He is the false god of the lie, and our own creation, who resides in stubborn illusions about who we are, and what we will do in revenge for not getting our own way.

*And considering nonsensical illusions ...*

#### **WE HAVE OUR NEXT DUMBTH NOMINEE**

[pic of Glen Beck]

I nominate Glenn Beck, conservative chowderhead and remarkably still coming into your living room via Fox and CNN. This if from his March 11 broadcast on Fox:

*"It's time to stop playing games in this country. It is time to actually believe in something. I do. I know you do as well. Believe in something. Even if it's wrong."*

Seriously.

— *David Rafferty*

## WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #114

*The New York Times*, March 30, 2009 – Page A16:

### ***8 People Are Killed in Shooting at a Nursing Home in North Carolina***

*The New York Times*, March 30, 2009 – Page A19:

### ***Texas Considers Allowing Guns On Campuses***

## “ZERO TOLERANCE” IN THE NANNY SOCIETIES

### ***In Canada: “Visions” of Abuse***

Colleen Leduc got a call from Terry Fox Elementary School, which her 11-year-old autistic daughter, Victoria, attends: “Come to school right away, it’s urgent.” There, the teacher and principal told Leduc that a special education aide had consulted a psychic, who said that a girl whose name started with “V” was being sexually abused. On that “evidence,” the principal said the school had already filed a sexual abuse report with the Children’s Aid Society. Once the local CAS office realized the case was based on a psychic reading, they closed it.

And, of course, all records of the “abuse” were erased and forgotten, right? Uh-huh.

### ***In the UK: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?***

To coordinate child-service agencies’ information, the British government put together a new database to list the name, gender, address, age and “sexual health” information of every child in the country. The system will be accessible to 330,000 users in 150 agencies.

Is anyone worried about such a gross invasion of privacy? Sure. The government responded to security concerns by announcing that celebrities can apply to keep details of their children out of the system.

*Oh, and politicians, too.*

### ***In Arizona: Be Happy We Strip-Searched a 13-Year-Old***

The US Supreme Court this term will hear the case of then-13-year-old Savana Redding, who six years ago was strip-searched at the Safford Middle School on suspicion of possession of “drugs,” i.e., prescription strength ibuprofen, equivalent to two Advils. She was made to expose her breasts and pubic area to prove she was not hiding pills, an experience so humiliating that she never returned to the school, contacted the ACLU, and sued.

When Savana’s outraged mother confronted the principal, he told her, “There was an incident with some pills, and we had to find out if Savana had them, but you should be happy because we didn’t find any on her.”

### ***In Pennsylvania: Combating Teen Pornographers***

“Sexting” is a new by-product of the MySpace and Twitter age—teens using their mobile devices to send each other suggestive and even nude pictures of themselves, i.e., acting like empty-headed teens.

In Wyoming County, PA, up-for-reelection District Attorney George Skumanick, ignoring the First and Fourth Amendments to the Constitution, has forced 13 teen girls and 4 boys on whose phones pictures were found to take 10-hour classes on pornography and sexual violence—or risk criminal prosecution and registration as “sex offenders.”

But 15-year-olds Marissa Miller and Grace Kelly fought back. Neither sent the two-year-old waist-up photo of themselves at a slumber party, both wearing bras, which Skumanick's office called "provocative," and they've gone to federal court to sue his blue nose.

*Good.*