

[POLITICS]

RECALL MADNESS

John Adams famously wrote, "There never was a democracy that did not commit suicide," and the nation he helped birth may yet prove him right.

The California recall is no mortal blow to the body politic. But it does introduce a tendency more revolutionary than republican. The electoral carnival that makes room for a body-builder, a porn king, an Indian chief, and 131 other colorful cast-members may seem a triumph of grassroots activism—if we envy Italy its disposable constitutions, France its five republics, or Singapore its parliamentary slugfests.

Republicans, more zealous to oust a vulnerable Democrat than to ponder the founders' arguments against direct democracy, have bought into this radical brand of populism. At best, it will hand them an untested governor only half sworn to their creed. At worst, and more likely, it will make space in American politics for the kind of electoral turbulence—at odds with conservatism's traditionalist temperament—whereby anyone with pockets deep enough to fund a petition drive can replace majority with plurality.

Time's Joe Klein noted on "Meet the Press," "What you need to sustain a democracy is something that we journalists hate, and that is a certain amount of consistency." Those able to look deeper into the past or longer into the future would have agreed, set the cyclone down, and prepared in earnest to replace in Davis in 2006. The price to California would have been democracy's profit.

[FAMILY]

MORE KIDS, MORE VOTES

Europe's collapsing birthrate and its attendant problems are easy to diagnose but frustratingly difficult to cure. The common approach (besides calling for more immigration) is—as the London *Times* has called it—"paying the stork."



That is, government subsidies and tax breaks for women who bear more than one child. Such schemes have indeed met with some modest success—especially in France and Scandinavia—although the Scandinavian experience suggests the effects diminish over time. The verdict: necessary, but not sufficient.

Enter the German Family Association. Its quixotic, but politically savvy, proposal is: let children vote. Paraphrasing the group's executive director, NPR reports, "[I]f children had that right, politicians would consider them constituents ... [which] could lead to policies that make life easier for parents, and that might reverse the dropping birth rate in Germany."

The objections are obvious, not least that most children lack the ability to make reasoned political decisions. So how could children's suffrage work in practice? Free Democrat politician Klaus Houft, who supports the measure, says, "The answer is simple. The parents are trustees of the child's right to vote."

Fortifying parents' electoral clout is the crux of the matter, and it has made the right enemies. Jutta Duempe Krueger of the Green Party argues, "[I]t would strengthen a rather conservative con-

cept of family ... It would also discriminate against childless people."

Of course, modern European policies and culture now favor childlessness. Hence the birth dearth. Whether this idea—which will come before Parliament but almost certainly fail—is an appropriate corrective is debatable. It is politically impractical and, in the end, perhaps undesirable. But it is encouraging. To avoid demographic catastrophe, the Old Continent requires just such innovative, radical solutions.

[CULTURE]

TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES

Recently we saw a bumper sticker that eloquently captured all the ambivalences of assimilation. Commemorating an Hispanic U.S. Marine killed in Iraq, the sticker was divided into three sections. On the left were the Mexican flag, a statement in Spanish, and the 21-year-old's name. On the right were the American flag, the same statement in English, and the dates of his birth and death. Caught in the middle, as it were, was the soldier himself, via his handsome official Marine Corps photo.

"In Honor of Our Hero! Our Aztec warrior!" read the bilingual caption. Leave

aside a moment the irony of invoking the Aztecs in reference to a Western imperial venture. ("Conquistador" would have been more like it.) For his eulogists, at least, the marine had a dual identity, centuries deep. (This apparently despite Mexico's well-publicized opposition to the war.) For them, he had two languages, two nations, two flags.

But there would have been only one to drape his coffin. This brave young man fought and died in the service of his country, the United States, and deserves to be remembered that way—indivisible.

[DEMOCRACY]

DANCING IN THE STREETS

If a reality show turned riot is any indication, hopes that our Iraqi makeover would seed a springtime of Arab democracy have been dealt a taste of, well, reality. "Superstar"—the Middle Eastern version of "American Idol"—was a televised music competition that reduced 11,000 wannabes to three finalists from Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan as each week millions registered their votes by telephone and Internet. The process ran smoothly until the semifinals when the Lebanese frontrunner was eliminated. Furious fans brought the live broadcast to a halt by storming the set, and protesters took to the streets alleging Syrian interference.

"Superstar" regrouped, but not before the quest for celebrity had morphed into a matter of national honor. Syria and Jordan both spun billboard-size publicity campaigns. In Damascus, a mobile phone company hung posters urging citizens to "Give your vote to Syria," and journalist Rasha al Atrash told *Variety* that in Jordan, "We have even heard rumors that King Abdullah ordered the army to vote." When the Jordanian victor was announced, fireworks lit the skies over Amman, and fans celebrated in the streets.

Muslim fundamentalists were less

pleased. The Islamic Action Front said that the show "facilitates the culture of globalization led by America to change the cultural identity of the people." The millions who tuned in may disagree or, more likely, not care. But if a song contest can so enflame public passion and draw charges of vote tampering, American democracy may seem far more alien than our music.

[EDUCATION]

THOSE WHO CAN'T SPEAK, TEACH

Massachusetts has handed conservatives yet another reason to oppose bilingual education: teachers who refuse to learn English. Across the state, teachers have failed a new exam designed to test basic English competency. But rather than being shamed by their marks, these teachers have launched a campaign to save their jobs. In Lawrence, 17 teachers have taken legal action against the school district; in Lowell four Cambodian-born teachers have filed complaints.

The regulations result from a ballot initiative approved by 68 percent of voters that mandates that teachers in English-only classrooms meet a "fluent and literate" standard. According to the teachers, this is too much to ask. Lowell teacher Songim Imm told the *Boston Herald* that it "came as a shock to me that teachers have to take a fluency test. ... I feel that all the work I have done for the past 20 years does not count." According to Imm, it is a simple case of discrimination: "I feel it's unfair. It's like they try to find a way to get rid of the minorities." Plaintiff Vera Tith also complains that her rights have been violated: "I came from the killing fields. I passed through. Where is the freedom? Where is the right to speak?" While these teachers may have difficulties with English, they have certainly demonstrated proficiency in the language of multiculturalism. ■

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Indiana Jones & The Real World

"I'm very troubled ... at the fact so many people in the United States carry guns. It obviously contributes greatly to the crime problems we have ... gun laws should be

strengthened." So sayeth Indiana Jones, a.k.a. Harrison Ford, on location in Spain. And it is fair to say Ford's view is that of our intellectual and cultural elite.

But is it true? Is it really obvious that gun ownership and the carrying of concealed weapons by citizens "contributes greatly to the crime problems we have"? Where is the evidence?

It does not exist. Indeed, all the evidence refutes that notion so dramatically it is astonishing that folks like Harrison Ford, a man of the world, can still believe and spout such nonsense.

In 1995, Gary Kleck published in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* of Northwestern Law School his now-famous paper, "Armed Resistance to Crime: The Prevalence and Nature of Self-Defense with a Gun." Among its unchallenged assertions:

- Law-abiding citizens use guns to defend themselves against criminals 2.5 million times a year or about 6,850 times every day.
- Of these 2.5 million self-defense uses of guns, more than 200,000 are by women defending themselves against sexual abuse. Often, a Saturday Night Special is a girl's best friend.
- 11 out of every 12 times citizens use their guns in self-defense, they merely brandish them or fire a warning shot.
- When citizens do fire, they shoot and kill twice as many criminals as do cops every year. But, while 2 percent of civilian shootings are of people mistaken for criminals, that is true of 11 percent of police shootings.

Publicized by the Gun Owners of America, these facts have been confirmed by scholar John Lott who has just published a book with Indiana Jones in mind: *The Bias Against Guns*. Its subtitle: "Why Almost Everything You've Heard about Gun Control is Wrong."

From the anecdotal evidence dug up by Lott, author of the previous best-seller, *More Guns, Less Crime*, burglars are more fearful of armed homeowners than of cops. A burglar in St. Louis colorfully explained why to authorities: "See, with the police, they goin' say, 'Come out with your hands up and don't do nothing foolish!' Okay, you still alive, but you goin' to jail. But you alive. You sneak into somebody's house and they wait 'til you get in the house and then they shoot you. ... See what I'm sayin'? You can't explain nothin' to nobody; you layin' down in there dead!"

Why do intelligent people believe armed citizens are less safe than unarmed ones? It seems to defy common sense. But Lott has discovered the reason. The media spike stories about the successful use of guns in self defense. To them it is simply not news.

Brandishing a gun stops crime 95 percent of the time, Lott learned. There are millions of such stories every year in communities all across the nation. Most often, the successful use of guns in self-defense occurs in high-crime urban neighborhoods. Why don't we read these stories? Because the media do not report them.

Going back through the *New York Times* of 2001, Lott found 50,745 words in 104 articles devoted to gun-crime sto-

ries. Only 163 words were about the successful use of guns in self defense.

The *Washington Post* had 46,884 words about crimes with guns, but only 953 words on the defensive use of guns. *USA Today* "contained 5,660 words on crimes committed with guns and zero words on examples of defensive gun use." To Big Media, bad news about guns is the only news worth reporting.

Being able to threaten a burglar or rapist with a gun is the most effective way to prevent crime in urban areas. Yet, city folks favor gun control. Why? Because they have been propagandized into believing their security lies not in having a gun but in gun control laws that disarm them but do nothing to disarm the criminals who prey upon them.

Going back through the ABC, CBS, and NBC shows for 2001, Lott found 190,000 words on gun crimes, but only 580 words devoted to one news broadcast about a cop who used his gun to stop a school shooting. Lott's chapter on the blind anti-gun bias in the press ("The Media on Guns") is itself worth the price of the book.

At journalism school, 40 years ago, we were taught, "The people have a right to know." And they have a right to know that the surest way to protect their families in high-crime areas is the possession of firearms. By concealing this truth, the media have made us all less secure.

After the horrific L.A. riots of 1992, gun sales soared, as did citizen demands for a right to carry concealed weapons. Thirty-five states have now enacted such laws, and the crime rate has correspondingly fallen, as has the incidence of "rampage killings" in these states. It is a provable fact: the better armed the citizenry, the fewer predator crimes they will endure.

Indiana Jones, say hello to John Lott. ■