

Great Thinkers and Other Scoundrels

When a thing is beyond our grasp, our comprehension, when it's supremely above the ordinary, we exceptional Americans have a tendency to label it "great." We are especially captivated by those who exhibit a certain "nobility of the mind." Those with mental powers beyond reasoned expectations, the kind of reasoning that's pulled from deep down in our gut, are often conferred the title of "Great Thinkers." Of course, when anything great presents itself, we are compelled by nature to be presented soon thereafter with a great many pretenders, impostors, if you will. Their arrival upon the stage of greatness is as predictable as the coming of a long-lost cast of relatives whose appearance can be attributed to nothing other than the celebration of a fortuitous obituary. Impostors can materialize out of the woodwork as easily as if *Scotty* had just beamed them up.

There isn't a person on earth who hasn't met as many great thinkers who can't think as think they can, and most of them have been somebody's boss. These include the creative leaders who advise us to think out of the box as they hurry us back to our cubicles. They also count among their numbers the absentee superiors who consume all the generally accepted working hours of the day, pondering their higher ambitions, before thinking of the one piece of information they must have in their possession by first thing next morning. The abundance of examples is so plentiful that I shall spare the reader further enumeration at this point. *(I tentatively promise to return to the burdensome details of supremely exceptional, great thinking, American impostors, whether public or private or sacred or secular, when a more thoughtful and outrageously humorous approach can be articulated, possibly in the following paragraphs, if fortune prevails.)*

I've come to understand that great thinkers are a lot like great politicians, whom I shall also articulate on at some undisclosed later time, and dogs. We have the underdogs and the top dogs. We have our working dogs and our lap dogs. At some point, every boy has had or wanted a hound dog. Hound dogs are, as a general rule, just lazy enough to be really great thinkers, especially when in the company of young boys who are only beginning to get into the thinking business. I guess you could say that they complement each other. The survival of young boys is absolute, scientific proof of this.

Then we come to the hot dog. Here, I mean the edible kind, not the poor soul attempting to achieve nothing more than his early demise in front of at least one other unfortunate bystander. No one wants to think too much about what a

hot dog is made of, but we know we like them and we eat a lot of them. Actually, because of economically oppressive and excessive governmental regulations, which, as you might have already imagined, I'll expound upon later, there's not supposed to be any dog meat in today's sausages. Yes, I said sausages. These smoked, tubular casings of beef and sometimes pork were originally called frankfurters or wieners, short for wienerwurst. That changed during World War I when all things German fell out of favor. How would you like to eat liberty cabbage instead of sauerkraut? Did you think Political Correctness began with freedom fries? You may or may not remember that the French had a different take on one of our former Vice President's little war to fix Iraq. Well, it was a war or some type of thing to fix something. The important thing is that the name, "hot dog," stuck and, so, that's what most of us call them.

Everyone thinks they can make a great hot dog. Some people put chili on them and think they're smart, the people, not the "dogs," so they call them chilidogs. Other people load them up with onions, mustard and catsup. That's how I like them. I don't much care for foot-long hot dogs, however, because of their tendency to wiggle out of the bun in advance of being devoured. Before I became highly civilized, I poked all manner of hot dogs with a stick and cooked them over a campfire out in the woods somewhere.

We have so many great thinkers in the United States that our whole nation has become highly civilized, so highly civilized that we try not to kill people we don't know until we can think of at least one good reason to hate them. That being accomplished, we sell some band of hooligans a bunch of guns in the hope that the hooligans will hate them, too, before they decide to hate us. At that point, we have to think of something different. This is where thinking out of the box we've just put ourselves into comes in handy. There's obviously more art than science in this line of thinking, but that's the way we seem to do it, time and again, as a matter of fact.

Nevertheless, our great thinkers have done a lot of scientific research and come up with a lot of scientific findings. For instance, they found some mighty interesting things about Pavlov's dog, which I'll not bore you with right now, except to say that those findings wouldn't have been found out if that dog had been born to be made into a sausage. Some people might conclude that the dog was foreordained to be a part of science. The reasoning behind such a conclusion completely escapes me. I think the dog's destiny was determined when Professor Pavlov looked around, caught sight of the dog, and figured he was just lazy enough to have experimented already with the thinking business. That made him

a prime candidate for research, along with Bierka, Rogdi and Drujok, plus a host of other Russian canines. I hope you didn't think that Ivan had only one scientific canine in his institute's kennel with which to discover *operant conditioning*! Externalizing a salivary gland can lead to a major commitment on the dog's part.

For the most part, however, great thinkers work with monkeys and rats and flies, even though the monkeys are beginning to form unions to campaign against this. I don't think Pavlov's dogs had anything against monkeys, or unions for that matter, though I can't say the same for rats and flies. In any event, I believe the dogs were glad to be off the hook because they were thinking that civilized people would be mighty offended if they didn't find some privacy the next time they felt the urge to lick their private parts. That's generally not a crowd pleasing performance at a civilized function. Monkeys apparently have a different attitude about their private parts, although I can't confirm whether this is a scientific finding or not, at least no more so than politicians can confirm global warming.

This is as good a point as any to mention onlookers. Onlookers have more time on their hands than participants have to think, and onlookers get pretty good at giving advice. The problem is that not many people want to take advice. That's too much like listening to someone else's version of the truth, and no one wants to do that. Advice also has a way of conflicting with a person's beliefs, and the Lord only knows how conflicting beliefs can lead to disagreements. Just ask the Athenians and the Persians, if you speak Greek or Persian, that is. I don't personally speak either, although I am proud I knew that the Athenians spoke Greek, because deep down in my gut, I know some of you thought they spoke Athenian. Regardless of what my gut thinks, since I don't speak Greek, my curiosity has languished far longer than I care to remember.

Disagreements, in turn, usually lead to a reduction in at least one of the disagreeable party's popularity. I guess that's why onlookers, as a general rule, tend to be less popular than other folks. If they wouldn't think so much and come up with all that advice, maybe, we'd be more apt to invite them in for Thanksgiving dinner, but that simply may be wishful thinking on their part. I hesitate to think that the Athenians ever invited the Persians to Thanksgiving dinner, even after we Americans invented it.

As I mentioned earlier, thinking led us into this civilization thing. Others have claimed that civilization is all about geography. I don't want to argue the point more than to say that this concept has no scientific basis and is nothing more than onlookers from outside the scientific community casting doubt in order to claim some benefit for their already discredited position. We can only hope

that the popularity of such barbaric beliefs falls into complete disrepute as we eliminate the remaining well established and vigorous pockets of ignorance from our geographic landscape.

In many regards, arguing about the origins of civilization is a lot like arguing about where to spend the money we, as a nation, budget annually for our country. Let me say that the mere thought that a budget exists is an assumption of mythical proportions. Our Government doesn't budget money. If it budgets anything, it budgets debt, which is, by itself, of mythical proportions. Our finances are far beyond the scope of comprehensible thought. So, no one gives our debt a second thought. Scientific theory stipulates that you can't give a thing a second thought if it can be proven beyond a reasonable doubt that it never received a first thought. We were apparently too busy spending the money we didn't have to realize that it no longer existed.

Some of our high thinking financial types tell us not to worry about this debt that's piling up. They tell us not to worry that it might eventually erode (that's whittle down) the value of the dollar. They say a devalued dollar will lead to greater exports and more jobs here at home. From what I've seen, these guys have the export part right on the button. They just forgot to mention that the thing to be exported was every good paying job we had in America. It seems we get to keep most of the low paying ones, however, and we should be thankful for that. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to work three low paying jobs to earn enough money to pay for the stuff we import from the people who were given our good paying jobs.

Given how all this has worked out, I don't understand why people keep immigrating here for what little work we still have. Maybe, they just want to see the Grand Canyon or go to Disney World. In any event, the financial types have also said that despite the debt piling up, the dollar is as good as gold, as long as the other countries on our planet are in worse financial shape than we are. We only have to give the other countries our recipe for how to cook the books and we can continue to serve up prosperity. Our Federal Reserve Bank will continue to issue debt in order to meet our budget and then our Treasury will buy the debt (that means print money) with an electronic entry so that we save printing costs. I can't imagine why we didn't think of this before the Chinese were able to acquire so much of our debt. If the debt the Chinese bought had been real estate, no one would have tolerated it.

The prosperity that we're enjoying helps our country live up to its principles, too. We, as a people, think we have a monopoly on principles, but that

honor belongs to our corporations. They're so principled they no longer need regulations to keep them honest. Today, no one is paid in corporate script. Today, no one owes their soul to the company store. Our workers hardly ever even have to compete against child or slave labor anymore, unless we import goods from Bangladesh or India or Indonesia or Thailand or China or South America or Mexico or ten or a hundred other good and faithful allies around the world. Our railroads are so principled that the vast majority are mostly safe. Only occasionally do they run off poorly maintained rails and blow up a major city or have a fatal crash with a school bus at a road crossing. Coal companies generally comply with safety requirements, if they don't cost too much, and they seldom get caught dumping coal sludge with all that arsenic into rivers and streams. Oil and gas pipelines and drillers don't contaminate our water with oil spills and fracking chemicals as often as before they became principled. Well, the Gulf of Mexico spill was a minor exception. Sometimes mistakes and accidents are like our children. They show up at the most inopportune time and very little will ever be done about it.

In fact, with fewer regulations, corporations have been able to achieve near monopoly power on just about everything they touch without ever considering how to profit from it. Sending jobs overseas, excluding foreign prescription drugs from importation as well as prohibiting price negotiations, and outright cutting workers' wages or turning fulltime jobs into part-time jobs have absolutely nothing to do with corporate profitability. After all, most of those wage savings have simply been moved up to the CEO level and the decimation of the middle class is, undoubtedly, because they refuse to work more than three part-time jobs at once. The middle class simply has to learn to adapt to its new paradigm and quit making such a fuss about their corrupt politicians. Such actions are costing corporations hundreds of millions of dollars in additional political bribes... I mean... contributions. Even our Supreme Court judges agree with the corporations, in 5-4 decisions, of course. I guess it would be fair to say that our current pack of *Robber Barons* have the law on their side. The concentration of our nation's wealth in the hands of the top one percent of its citizens is a shining example of the American system of justice. Any one of our kids out of a hundred can succeed beyond an exceptional kid's wildest dreams.

Corporations certainly have no reason to dishonor our nation's principles unless, by some miracle, competition shows up and then principles merit about as much respect as Communism. Capitalism is really indebted to the Communist. If we didn't have China lending us the money they've made from the jobs we exported, we wouldn't be half as rich as a very few of us are today. Whether rich

or only standing in line for food stamps and wondering what it's like to be rich, we understand that there is a difference between Capitalist America and Communist China.

Anyone who can spare a dime knows the difference between capitalism and communism. When our rich evade the law, they generally escape punishment, as well. We only have to look as far east as Wall Street to find proof of that. From what I know of the Chinese, they haven't adopted the custom of forgiving crimes against the state yet. We could try to export Wall Street, like Wall Street exported our jobs, and give the Chinese another shot at adoption of our capitalist policies, but I don't think they would take Wall Street in its present condition. Being beholden to the Federal Reserve and dependent on its stimulus for profits is a lot like being on welfare, and being on welfare is about as sick as capitalism gets. Given time, the Chinese may try to copy it though. Who can imagine what a billion unregulated Communist-variety capitalists could do?

In the long run, I think China's fascination with American capitalism will be much like America's early interest in democracy. As long as it's a novelty, it will take possession of their imagination and hold favor as if a priceless treasure; but when it becomes familiar, every distraction will make other illusions more dearly cherished. We Americans are undoubtedly the best example of this. We have bravely fought world wars to win the hand of democracy in marriage, but we have pleased ourselves with the fruits of a mistress after each battle. Evidently, based on our continued enjoyment of democracy's companionship, she has yet to find a good lawyer, at least not one experienced in the divorce business. I think there's still hope for us if we change our ways, and there's nothing like the sight of a lawyer coming after a person's worldly pleasures to cause a man to repent.

Repentance is a mighty powerful and emotional human experience, which is more often put into practice for doing a right thing than for doing a wrong thing, especially if the wrong thing is profitable and the right one is not. In any case, most people are for repentance and think it has merit, if done without compulsion. Repentance on one's deathbed is particularly popular and can be profitable for some if the gifting of fortunes is involved. Whether compulsion is involved, if one is on one's deathbed, is another matter. A lot of rich people practice repentance, but most try to do it in moderation and some have managed to refrain from it altogether for long periods. It is one of their greatest sacrifices.

Even the poor of our nation have an abundance of repentance going on, not to mention their untold amount of sacrifice and debt. We are the world's richest nation of debtors. Look around. Debtors are like gas stations. They're only

limited by the number of corners available. If you find a corner without a gas station on it, that's only because the gas station's been turned into a barbecue restaurant. If you find a corner without a debtor on it, that's only because the barbecue restaurant is being used for some politician's fundraiser and the police have moved the poor people to a church downtown so they can repent some more.

I like barbecue, probably as much as I like hot dogs, but I can't say that I've given my likes and dislikes much thought. I don't really know why I like some things so much and have little use for other things. I do know that I don't like ignorance very much, and that brings me back to the geographical dispute I spoke of previously. Geographical disputes have long plagued our nation. We think so differently that we divided ourselves into fifty states, and we still can hardly stand to be around each other.

At one time or another, all sorts of people have thought they wanted to leave our union and go somewhere else. A lot of the ones who want to stay say, "Good riddance!" This is particularly true if it's Texans who want to leave. My home state of South Carolina and a bunch of others, including the aforementioned Texas, tried to leave once, and that didn't work out so well. Maybe, Texans should think about that and, maybe, they'd decide to think of something better this time. I certainly hope so, because I live in Texas now, and I really like baseball and eating hot dogs at a game. As I understand it, baseball is America's pastime and I don't think Texans have given much thought to what they'd replace baseball and a hot dog with if they left America. Sometimes, I wonder whether the people who come up with these crazy ideas can walk upright and think at the same time, and that goes double for all those with a wad of Juicy Fruit gum and Red Man chewing tobacco in their mouths.

Some people are just so unpredictable. That's why I worry so much. I worry about some people having so many guns. I worry so much that I bought five guns, myself. When I was an avid hunter, I had two guns, a shotgun and a rifle. When I quit hunting so much, I had more time to worry, so I bought more guns, mostly pistols. According to the U.S. Air Force, I was an expert marksman with a pistol. If that's the case, I worry about all those other people who aren't experts. I can only hope that nobody has shown them how to load the darn things. I think unloaded guns would add more safety to the world than all of us experts on the streets with our loaded guns. I would say that it's a fact that unloaded guns don't kill people, but sometimes they do. I know it's hard to believe, but it happens.

As a matter of fact, every time I see a person with a large bulge in his pants, I wonder how expert he is in using the thing and that goes for the women as well. There's nothing scarier in our civilization than a street crammed full of people with a bunch of bulges in their pants. You just never know when there might be a wardrobe malfunction.

Speaking of large things, have you noticed how big the price tag is on some of the newest luxury cars? I think I saw where Mercedes was going to offer a luxury vehicle starting at over \$200,000. If it takes that much to start it, I don't think there will be very many people who can afford to drive it. I even heard that a Mercedes spokesperson said that the top one percent of Americans was now so rich that Mercedes only wanted to deal with the top one-quarter of one percent so that they wouldn't tarnish their reputation. I know that's secondhand hearsay, but it's the truth, and I'd hate to be in the three-quarters of the top one percent who just got kicked out. They must feel pretty awful right now. If they'd ask, I'd tell them not to worry about it and that buying another gun wouldn't make them feel any better. I'll bet Mercedes would agree with me on this point. As a matter of fact, I'd invite any of those who were kicked out to go window shopping with me. Window shopping costs a lot less than a Mercedes and you don't have to keep taking another expensive car in for all those recalls.

After my last car was recalled, I got rid of it and bought a newer one just like it. I say, "Just like it," because the newer one was recalled two months after I bought it. I told the dealer he could have saved a lot of his time if he had fixed it before he let me drive it away. "Don't worry about it," he said, "that's what we're here for." I thought at the time, if that's what he's there for, he should have steady work, which is more than I can say for the rest of us.

Many of us went to college so we could have a career and make a little money without having to work too much. College was supposed to make us think or, in some manner, teach us to think. From what I know of many college graduates, quite a number of us should get our money back. I don't think a college education would be so important if we didn't have to pay so much for it. The cost of college has risen so much that by the time we've paid for it, it's too late to start saving for retirement. It seems to me that many of us could retire just as broke without having to cut all those classes for four or five or six years.

Some people don't think colleges are overpriced. If you don't believe me, ask the colleges. Nevertheless, I don't think anyone would disagree that they're overcrowded. A lot of people who want to go can't get in. You might think that people choose a college based on cost and whether its graduates can find a job. I

don't think there's any scientific evidence to support this theory. I believe the most important criterion to be whether or not the college has a successful football team. The second most important criterion would be how many party houses there are versus those of the academic variety, and the third criterion would be how many Greeks there are. The Persians, evidently, don't count.

You can always tell a college with a winning football team. It's the one building a new stadium for the alumni while a committee studies how to raise funds for dormitories, lecture halls and the research library of tomorrow. Did you ever notice how the richest alumni sit along the fifty-yard line while the students crowd into the end zone seats? Of course, if you're a senior in college, you've been moved up to the ten-yard line, next to the ordinary alumni. I found that every time the players had the ball on my end of the field and were about to score, the quarter ended and they moved eighty yards the other way.

Except for football, many people misunderstand college. There's probably an equal amount of misunderstanding about college students. In my day, there were a great many students going to college because we had a war going on and we had the draft. If you were going to college and kept your grades at a respectable level, the draft board generally left you alone. However, you couldn't count on being at war all the time like we are today, so you had to take advantage of not going to war as soon as you qualified. You never knew when the next war would come along. Today's college students don't have to worry about war like we did. They can join the military anytime they wish and there's always a politician who can browbeat enough intelligence officers to start a war and hire enough lawyers to say whatever we do is legal. I think that's what makes our Government so exceptional. It can buy whatever facts and opinions it needs, and on credit, too.

Some of our governmental leaders have become indispensable at starting wars. Republicans seem to have a better understanding of the merits of war, but Democratic types seem to tag along in order not to be seen as soft on war. As a result, we have a great many bipartisan wars. While one might worry about the loss of a war, politics being what they are, no one should worry about the loss of a politician. Politicians have gerrymandered their districts to such an extent that not one of them has to be bothered with the dirty business of a fair election. Neither do we have to worry about our governmental leaders' safety. Almost none of them serve or have served in any of the wars they've started.

Beyond the few exceptions I've mentioned, I don't think college students today are much different than those in my day. They simply are asked to pay a lot

more for the same thing. I personally think they should receive a guarantee of a job instead of a diploma and, if they don't find a job within a reasonable time, the colleges should have to give their money back. That way, the smart ones could put this money in some account and, by the time they paid off their college loans, they could retire with quite a nice nest egg. Anyway, this is how I learned to think in college.

Back then, my line of thinking was called economics, but colleges don't teach the kind of economics I thought about because everybody has plastic, lots of it. "Plastics" is the one word we need to remember, as we learned from Mr. McGuire in *The Graduate*, which is what each of us wanted to be, and we were listening. Having plastic entitles a person to credit. Credit means you can buy anything, anytime, without having to pay for it. I've never understood this concept, even though I studied economics, as I said, in college. So, I don't use plastic for credit and, as far as I can tell, I still have more possessions than my house can tolerate.

I should, possibly, think about buying a bigger house and then I could look into living on credit and help improve our economy. That would at least make me equal with everybody else. Right now, I feel like a minority, not having any debt, I mean. I feel like I'm not doing my part to keep our bank CEOs in their mansions, yachts and private planes. I'm not like some people. I believe charging interest on loaned money is fair, but I think the exorbitant amount of interest charged on credit cards is at least a percent or two too high. Some even add fees and penalties and court costs on top of this to increase the burden, and up front, too. I've never understood how banks justified charging so much on loans to people when they pay people so little on the money that people loan to the banks in what's called deposits. Some banks act like they're doing depositors a favor by taking their money. It makes even an average fellow think there might be a little too much of what used to be known as profit, before banks got so principled, hidden in there somewhere. I shouldn't be too hard on the banks while they're still on welfare from the Federal Reserve, however. What purpose would it serve if a bank CEO had to give up a mansion or two, or a private plane, or one of those gold-plated yachts? A banker deserves a few minor pleasures.

I don't think anyone wants to be forever in the minority and, certainly, there's a lot to be said for equality. That's how our founding fathers saw things and how I pretty much see things. If I get through with becoming equal, I guess I'll be happier than I am now, but by then things might have changed, as things seem to do from time to time. For this reason, I may think on it a while longer. It might

be better if I tend to my own business and not worry about everyone being equal all the time. Some of my friends still ask me, "Wouldn't it be great if we had equality for everyone?" After considering this question far longer than many of my friends seem to consider necessary, I have finally concluded that, if everyone is equal, no one will be great. I have, therefore, accepted that those who are created equal are also free to choose the path they want to travel and enjoy or suffer the consequences of their choices. This conclusion has lost me some old friends and gained me some new ones. That's how conclusions work.

I've also found that some people are born determined to rise above the rest of us. I don't personally see any harm in this. Other people don't want to go down that path for one reason or another and I think that's fine, too. I couldn't figure out how to rise up to the level of some of the most successful people around me, so I learned to fly. Actually, the Air Force taught me. It seemed to get me as high as I cared to go without hurting anybody along the *delirious burning blue* way up and I kind of liked that. After I learned to not look down so much, I liked it even more. Looking down on people all the time isn't a whole lot of fun. At least, it isn't for me.

While I'm talking about fun, most of us have heard the saying that *ignorance is bliss*. I don't know if this is true or not. It seems to me the more ignorant a person is the more apt he is to get into an argument. I may be wrong, but the biggest argument I ever heard in college was between two fellows arguing about the difference between fact and fiction. Of course, I was pulling for the guy arguing the facts. I quickly learned that this put me back in the minority. After that, I vowed to never belabor facts when fiction would chart a better course. You see, I found that knowledge leads to discontent. Too much knowledge and you get an abundance of discontent.

The same can't be said for rumor. Rumor is a cousin of ignorance. It's eaten up like strawberries and ice cream. You give a man facts, on the other hand, and he's as likely to call you a liar as he is to accept the facts. On a bad day, this can lead a man straight into an argument. If you want to avoid arguments, let a man live in bliss. Why! The more ignorant a man is, the less likely it is that a thought ever enters his head that he's not the brightest person on Earth. It makes a man wonder why he went to college.

People are beginning to ask whether college is worthwhile. Some are even saying it's a premeditated conspiracy to defraud our young people of an abundance of other opportunities. A few colleges differentiate themselves from run-of-the-mill colleges by calling themselves institutions of higher learning while

even others call themselves research universities. These are the ones that typically charge the most, if you don't count what ivy-league schools cost, and I don't. I calculate that a kid could be sent to the movies all day long and fed hot dogs, popcorn and candy (the same things they eat at college) for about \$150 per day. That would be about \$45,000 a year, taking into consideration holidays and weekends and such, or about the same as the cost of a good college. I know people don't go to the movies to learn or practice thinking, but it's something to consider, especially with schools being as crowded as they are.

I think fascination plays a big part in most things that Americans like. Americans are fascinated with celebrities like movie stars and not so much with college professors, unless the professor is an astrophysicist or economist. The universe and money are two topics that rarely go out of favor. Dinosaurs are another topic that many people are fascinated with. A great many of us are having a hard time figuring out when they lived and when we came along, however. I'm proud to say that we haven't taken our relationship, or lack of a relationship, with dinosaurs to court, though, like we have with the apes. This shows that we can come to terms with anything if we're given a few hundred million years.

While I'm not generally one to pick sides, I think the movies are better at keeping kids out of trouble than professors are. Perhaps, it's because kids don't cut going to the movies as frequently as they cut going to classes. With all the trouble kids get into at college, it's a good thing colleges usually have some sort of health care plan. That's where the movies fall a bit short. On top of that, movies are infamous for all the violence they contain, but I think it's a tossup as to whether more Americans are killed in the movies or in classrooms. This may have more to do with our fascination with guns, which I neglected to mention, than our fascination with movies or even with our learning how to think about the universe and economics. Otherwise, my thoughts on civilization begin to fall apart at this point.

I'll give colleges credit for one thing in this regard. College teaches you to be broadminded. A college graduate can study a problem from all angles and then come up with an argument to support any side that will pay him the most money. This is what they call expert testimony in our courts of lawlessness. This is where I could talk about lawyers, but I'm not going to stoop to that level other than to say that they're a fascinating bunch and almost as civilized as the rest of us.

Anytime you see an innocent bystander shot on a street corner, whether in front of a gas station or a barbecue restaurant, two or more lawyers will be there.

They're impartial in that regard. One will represent the shooter against the people's court and the other will represent the victim against his insurance company. They may not even ask for the totality of their fees up front, if they can make up a good enough story about the shooting.

The worst thing to happen to a lawyer is to get to the scene of a shooting and find that it was the police who did it. A policeman can shoot a bystander just for standing on the corner, if the bystander looks like the disagreeable sort. The bystander doesn't even have to have a gun. If a bystander has anything large in his pants when a policeman comes by, he better get rid of it before his wardrobe gets ventilated by a magazine full of bullets. I think a person can scare a policeman just by breathing. So, as long as you're breathing, consider yourself a threat. I recommend holding your breath as long as you can before and after sighting a policeman. That way, you won't have to smell the gunpowder fumes and, worst case; you'll pass out before you get shot to pieces.

I don't know how the lawyers can put up with this. I don't even know who's more tolerant, the lawyers or the bystanders who have to stand there while they're shot so many times. The police know that whenever a lawyer is around, however, shootings have to be investigated. To help these investigations along, the police departments have their own impartial and independent investigators to scrutinize things. A lot of police unions can supply an impartial and independent investigator, plus an official-looking spokesperson, at a moment's notice. The near unanimous findings of most of these investigations are a testament to the unimpeachable dedication of our police in serving and protecting everyone of any importance. They also keep our courts from being filled up with dead bystanders. In any event, I think there's nothing that's been as overestimated as the benefits of dying in this manner, except possibly our elections and the politicians we're handed.

Politicians have sunk to such a low level in the country's estimation that it's almost impossible to insult one. For the most part, if they have any intelligence at all, they never put it on display. Our politicians are fond of spending someone else's money on military hardware and cutting taxes on the rich. You'd think the foreigners who lent us the money, so we could continue to push them around, would get tired of this. The American people are certainly tired of paying taxes and getting nothing in return. It's always the other guy who gets everything and the American people want it to stop. One of these days we're going to elect somebody different to represent us in Washington and our current stock of crooks will have to go to work to make a living.

I doubt there are enough corporate boardrooms in America to house many of the politicians who need to be thrown out. Even for those who did get through the boardroom door, corporations couldn't afford to set up the new guys in royal accommodations and keep the old guys in the same style as they'd become accustomed to while they were in Washington. Some of them might have to travel around in those \$200,000 Mercedes instead of Cadillac limousines, that is, until they find something better.

Since these politicians have approved sending so many jobs overseas in the past few years while catering to corporations and their profits, they might have to be consultants for a while. That appears to be a highly compensated and growing field of work. If not, they might try being appointed to an independent committee. Any good committee can use a washed-up politician on its roster. That inevitably adds credibility to the politician, if not the committee. We must never forget, no matter our point of view, that politicians do serve at least one useful purpose. They provide most of the material for every joke that any American can remember, and that's as bipartisan as any politician will ever be.

When it comes to politicians, I'm not like many Americans. I judge a politician, and his intelligence, by how many points of view he can articulate in a single argument. For the vast majority of them, it's one, unless they're an independent and then it's none or two, depending on the latest poll of likely available people or, perhaps, someone off the street. I think the next time that we have a presidential debate we should ask only two questions. The first would be, "What's your point of view on war?" The second would be, "What's your point of view on taxes and debt?" The purest among you might say that I've asked three questions. Please allow me to say that I have doubts as to whether any of you are that pure. I'm not. Moving on, these two questions would tell us right away who was your crook and who was my crook. Then we could hold the election without spending so much money and wasting so much time. This would save the corporations a ton of money, since they wouldn't have to buy a bunch of pretend politicians before they found out who the real ones were. Saving these bribes, there I go again, would increase profits and achieve the expected result that rich people had been promised.

This would also cut back on mistakes like the ones the banks had to suffer when some misguided politicians tried to regulate derivatives. I won't bore you with what a derivative is except to say that it's like an insurance policy with nothing backing it up except the taxpayer, but it makes a lot of money for the banks. Well, the banks had to buy these misguided politicians twice, along with

one or two others because we had some new ones after our last election. The banks have made it clear that this kind of thing has to stop. Otherwise, they might have to start issuing worthless mortgage-backed securities again, I mean bonds, in order to boost profits and maintain their standard of living. Let's all root for the banks. We can't afford any more Wall Street welfare than the Federal Reserve already has in place. Our capitalists feel bad enough without being in the news every night.

This regulation craze just goes to show that no one can ever know a politician from top to bottom, front to back or backward and forward. If I had to settle on one way, it would be backward, for that's the way they are generally taking our nation. Having no expectations to the contrary would eliminate a great deal of disappointment. We can be certain of one truth in politics. The only thing that can make a politician change his course is a poor man standing between him and a rich man. I have to admit that I admire anyone who knows which side his croissant is buttered on, and you can't blame rich people for wanting to have the country run their way. That's all they've ever known. Besides that, this arrangement makes certain that at least one percent of the nation is not discontented, and that's a real accomplishment for a politician.

If I'm fortunate enough to have a similar one percent of people crack a smile or get into the business of thinking because of my musings on *Great Thinkers and Other Scoundrels*, I suppose I should be pleased at reaching the same pinnacle as our people in high office. I'll put it right up there with chewing gum without biting my tongue. In the end, no earthly souls past birth, after being slapped on their backsides by someone who just evicted them from their homes, are pure of heart, pure of mind or pure as the driven snow. Whether science can prove that humankind is more civilized than the monkey when it comes to how we handle our private parts may be as difficult a question as whether our politicians will ever confirm global warming, but if we don't do something to reduce humankind's footprint on this planet by the time our kids can get into the business of thinking for themselves, our kids are going to think snow comes from a yellow machine made by Caterpillar.

In closing, let me leave you to ponder a few supremely above the ordinary questions. Are we, we exceptional Americans, nothing more than impostors? Have we arrived upon the stage of a great and almost incomprehensible universe only after our forefathers gave birth to the Industrial Revolution and, in doing so, unwittingly wrote our planet's calamitous obituary?

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