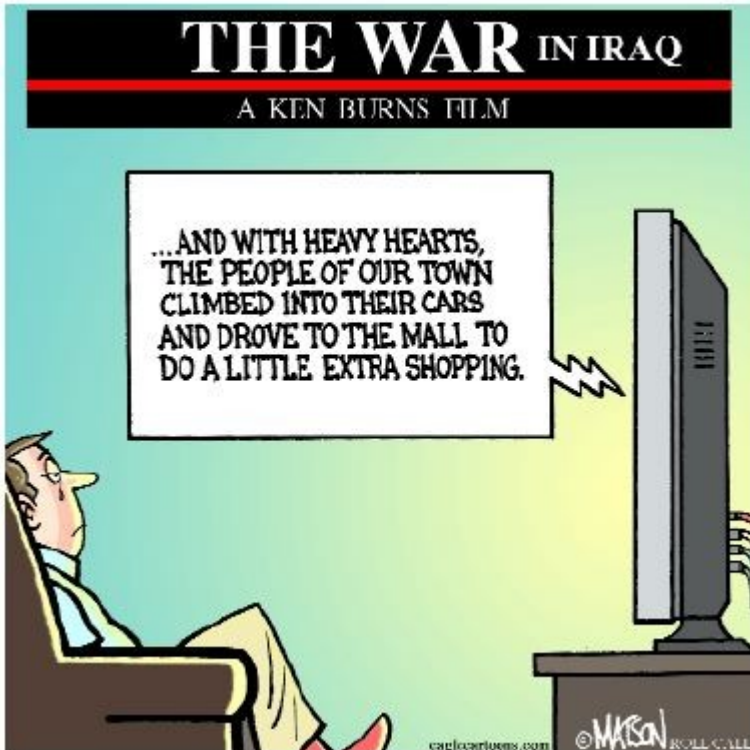


Century Marks

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Let's get together: Former president Bill Clinton got drug companies to reduce their prices on AIDS drugs for developing nations by forming countries into partnerships, like buyers' clubs. The Clinton Foundation sought large drug orders from African and Caribbean countries on the assumption that the price could be cut substantially, and in turn it asked drug companies to offer low prices with the understanding that there would be high-volume purchases. Clinton says, "What we tried to do was to get [the drug companies] to go from what I call a 'jewelry-store model' to a 'grocery-store model'—from a high-profit, low-volume, uncertain-payment business to a low-margin, high-volume, certain-payment business." The foundation is now using a similar business model to encourage cities to buy environmentally friendly products (*Atlantic*, October).

Religious enigma: Greg Epstein works as a minister at Harvard University, yet he doesn't believe in God, he preaches to atheists and agnostics, and he is attempting

to form the equivalent of a church for nonbelievers. A former lead singer in a rock band, he marries and buries fellow atheists and has even presided over baby-naming ceremonies. “I have a religious personality, without a scintilla of religious belief,” humanist Epstein says. “If it’s an oxymoron to believe that people who have ceased to believe in God still need caring and community, then I’m proud to be a walking oxymoron.” He is part of a larger trend of nonbelievers organizing themselves on campuses. The number of groups associated with the Secular Student Alliance has increased by more than 50 percent in the past two years (*Boston Globe*, September 16).

Mental walls: When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, German theologian Gerhard Sauter was visiting the United States. When he watched it happening on TV, he at first thought he was watching a new American movie, and he admired the realistic set. Almost two decades after the event, Sauter says that a mental wall still exists between east and west. Unification meant the west annexing the east, which wounded the self-esteem of people in the former East Germany. In fact, East Germans came up with a moniker for West Germans—*Besserwessis*, “know-it-alls” (*Theology Today*, October).

Redemptive violence: Ever since September 11, 2001, there has been a spate of books attempting to explain why religion has a peculiar tendency toward violence. Many of these arguments, says William T. Cavanaugh, are misplaced. It is impossible to distinguish religion from other spheres of activity in most cultures, including Islamic ones. And these arguments tend to mask the tendency of secular states to expect absolute commitment from their subjects and to use violence for its own interests. Cavanaugh suggests this empirical test: find out what percent of Americans would be willing to kill for their faith and what percent would be willing to kill for their country. “Whether we attempt to answer these questions by survey or by observing American Christians’ behavior in wartime,” says Cavanaugh, “it seems clear that, at least among American Christians, the nation-state is subject to far more absolutist fervor than Christianity” (*Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, spring/summer).

No exit? In a *New Yorker* article (September 17), George Packer considers different exit strategies in Iraq and asks, “What if there is no such thing as a ‘responsible exit’ from Iraq?” The problems created by the Iraq war will persist after American troops leave, including “the rise of Iranian power, the emergence of Al Qaeda in Iraq, the radicalization of populations, the huge refugee crisis, the damage to a new generation of Iraqis who are growing up amid the unimaginable.” He concludes:

“Whenever this country decides that the bloody experience in Iraq requires the departure of American troops, complete disengagement will be neither desirable nor possible. We might want to be rid of Iraq, but Iraq won’t let it happen.”

The immigration question: Responses to surveys about what the government should do with undocumented aliens depend on how the question is asked. When asked if illegal immigrants should be prosecuted and deported for being in the U.S. illegally, 69 percent agreed. However, when the question was what should happen to illegal immigrants who have lived and worked in the U.S. at least two years and alternatives to deportation were suggested, only 33 percent thought that such people should be deported, and 62 percent said they should be allowed to keep their jobs and eventually apply for legal status. When Gallup offered four choices, only 14 said illegal immigrants should be required to leave the U.S. and not return, and 78 percent thought that illegal immigrants should be able to achieve citizenship (*New York Review of Books*, September 27).

Disaster capitalism: Many of the U.S. companies that had lucrative contracts in Iraq were given contracts for the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Halliburton’s KBR unit won a \$60 million contract to rebuild military bases along the gulf. Parsons, known for doing sloppy work in Iraq, was hired to reconstruct bridges in Mississippi. Blackwater USA, which the Iraqi government now wants to throw out of Iraq for killing innocent civilians, was hired to protect FEMA operations at the cost of \$950 a day per guard. Blackwater has used revenue from these government contracts to build up its own paramilitary infrastructure. It has built a private army of 20,000 on-call soldiers and has its own military base in North Carolina valued at between \$40 and \$50 million (*Harper’s Magazine*, October).

Elements of a good story: In a review of Anwar Accawi’s memoir, *The Boy from the Tower of the Moon*, Heather Harris quotes a writer friend of hers who said that “every great story boils down to religion and sex: the possibility of being naked with someone else and the probability of being observed by a divine third party who has an opinion on the whole thing.” But a third element is needed, she says: “A well-calibrated sense of humor is the holy ghost in the trinity of elements that shows up in a truly great story, particularly one that is based on actual events. The carnality/spirituality of real life is best expressed with one’s tongue slightly in one’s cheek.” She holds up the work of Garrison Keillor as an example of this type of writing (*Baltimore City Paper*, September 26).