

# Century Marks

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IF A TREE FALLS IN A FOREST UNTWITTERED, DOES IT MAKE A SOUND?

Pat Bagley, Salt Lake Tribune

**Poor criteria:** When writer Paul Wilkes helped start a ministry to the poor and homeless in Brooklyn, supporters discussed whether they should use some criteria to identify the truly needy. Wilkes's spontaneous response was: "Just that they come to us, literally begging, says enough. Let's not humiliate them further. I didn't see Christ applying a means test. We're not going to either" (*In Due Season*, Jossey-Bass).

**No entrance:** D. Erickson, writer of a letter in the *Sun* magazine (April), recalls how his family's life revolved around the Catholic parish where his mother served as catechism coordinator. She also liked to spar over theology with their aging, lovable priest. When word leaked out that the priest was going to announce to his parish at mass that he had AIDS, the bishop showed up with a reporter and a photographer to make an example of the man. Erickson's mother forbade the bishop from letting the cameraperson inside the church. She was not going to let the bishop and his entourage exploit the parish's grief.

**Held responsible:** Should people be held responsible for decisions they made when they didn't know what they were doing? The usual answer is no. But theologian Stanley Hauerwas says that that response makes marriage unintelligible. "Of course you did not know what you were doing when you promised life-long

monogamous marriage, but Christians are going to hold you to promises you made when you did not know what you were doing” (*A Cross-Shattered Church*, Brazos).

**Which Niebuhr?** There were many Reinhold Niebuhrs: the onetime socialist and pacifist, the realist supporter of the New Deal and World War II, the anticommunist who eventually critiqued anticommunism and the Vietnam War. And today there are many who claim Niebuhr on the right, left and in between—including President Obama. But Gary Dorrien of Union Theological Seminary in New York says that neoconservatives who claim Niebuhr are “mostly kidding” about having much in common with the theologian. “If the neocons had absorbed even half of Niebuhr’s realism, we might have been spared the very bad idea of invading Iraq” (SSRC Blogs).

**Won’t go:** Specialist Victor Agosto of the U.S. Army, who spent 13 months deployed in Iraq, has refused an army order to go to Afghanistan. He was originally scheduled to be discharged at the end of June, but in keeping with the stop-loss program the army decided to deploy him to Afghanistan. In Iraq he had decided not only that these wars are unjust and immoral, but that they make Americans less safe. If Agosto continues to refuse deployment, he will face a court martial and jail time—consequences he says he is prepared to accept (Inter Press Service).

**Less is more:** Several Dartmouth studies show that spending more money on health care does not necessarily yield better results. The four states with the highest Medicare spending levels—Louisiana, Texas, California and Florida—rank near the bottom nationally in the quality of patient care. Conversely, quality care does not necessarily have to be the most expensive. The Mayo Clinic, arguably one of the best health-care systems in the country, is also one of the least expensive. Mayo recruits doctors who are committed to putting patients rather than profit first and who are willing to work as part of a team. The doctors also work on a salary basis—pay is unrelated to how many tests or procedures they request or conduct (*New Yorker*, June 1).

**Guilt by association:** Arab Christians, an ever-smaller minority in the Middle East, are caught in the struggle between Israelis and Muslim Palestinians. Many Arab Christians say that the attitudes and actions of Christians in the West don’t help their situation. Western Christians “assume all Arabs are Muslim—terrorists, that is,” says one young father. And the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as U.S. support for Israel, appear to many Muslims like a modern version of the Crusades. “Because

we're Christians," says a representative of the Middle East Council of Churches, "they see us as the enemy too. It's guilt by association" (*National Geographic*, June).

**Iran and the bomb:** Iranian religious leaders have maintained that the development of nuclear weapons is "un-Islamic." Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued a fatwa in 2004 saying the use of such weapons is immoral. He subsequently said in a sermon that even "developing, producing or stockpiling nuclear weapons is forbidden under Islam." The Iranians may be lying, says *Newsweek* analyst Fareed Zakaria. "But it seems odd for a regime that derives its legitimacy from its fidelity to Islam to declare constantly that these weapons are un-Islamic if it intends to develop them" (*Newsweek*, June 1).

**Editorial control:** Wikipedia, the user-edited Internet encyclopedia, has banned the Church of Scientology from editing entries about the religion. Internet addresses known to be "owned or operated by the Church of Scientology and its associates, broadly interpreted, are to be blocked," according to Wikipedia's arbitration committee. The decision came amid a battle between admirers and critics of Scientology over the more than 400 articles on the topic. Wikipedia traced some of the editorial changes to "editors openly editing from Church of Scientology equipment and apparently coordinating their activities." A spokesperson for the Church of Scientology noted that people known for their opposition to Scientology were also being prohibited from editing Scientology-related entries (ENI).

**Saving Michael Vick?** Michael Vick, former star in the National Football League, has served time in prison for running a dogfighting operation. The Humane Society has started conversations with Vick in the hopes that he will join in their campaign against dogfighting, which is popular among some urban youth. Tony Dungy, a former player and coach in the NFL who has visited Vick in prison, believes Vick "deserves a second chance in life. . . . Least important, we might see him play football again. I'm not sure of the Michael Vick we would see on the field, but I believe we would see a very different person off the field" (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 28; *Sports Illustrated*, May 25).