

Century Marks

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THE SENATE'S WINDOW INTO THE MIND OF JOHN ROBERTS

RJ Matson, Roll Call

Where's the crisis? Robert Ball, 91, former commissioner of the Social Security Administration, is an ardent supporter of the program. "There's no Social Security crisis today," he said. "When we did have one, to the extent that it really was one, we fixed it," referring to the adjustments made to the program in 1983. There is a problem, Ball admits, but it is an issue external to SS: the rising gap in income between the rich and the poor. In 1983, the goal was set to tax 90 percent of all earnings for Social Security. With the current cap on Social Security taxes set at \$90,000, only about 85 percent of all earnings are now taxed for Social Security revenue. This slippage has cost the program \$200 billion over the past 20 years, and over the next 75 years, if the cap isn't increased sufficiently, it could cost the program \$1 trillion more. Ball advocates gradually increasing the cap to reach the 90 percent goal again (*The American Scholar*, Summer).

Assaying the tide: Columnist Mary Schmich thinks that when we look back on the Iraq war, August 2005 may appear as the point when the tide of public opinion turned against the war (*Chicago Tribune*, November 17). It is not just that more than half the people now think the war was a mistake; or that Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a soldier killed in Iraq who demands a hearing with the president at his Crawford ranch, has become a symbol of opposition to the war, even for some who first supported it. Schmich says the turning of the tide for her was signaled by a letter she received from a Republican-leaning businessman who wrote: “Henry Kissinger quoted Mao as observing, ‘The established authority loses if it does not win; the insurgent wins if he does not lose.’” The correspondent wrote that “in Iraq the insurgency won’t prevail; we won’t let it. But it won’t lose. The conclusion, to me, is inescapable—we’ve already lost. Time to come home.”

Not bread alone: Famine in Niger is much in the news, but rarely mentioned is the issue of population growth, says John F. Rohe. Niger has 12 million people, but its population is projected to grow to 53 million in 2050 despite widespread loss of life because of malnutrition, AIDS and other calamities. Niger has the highest fertility rate in the world, at 8.0 children per woman, according to the Population Reference Bureau. While food aid is urgently needed there, Rohe argues that such aid must be accompanied by funding for family planning (www.caglecartoons.com).

American amnesia: Americans are afflicted with a condition David Sarasohn calls “Africa Attention Deficit Disorder.” Periodically, cataclysmic episodes in Africa appear on our radar screens. We hear of massacres in Sudan, starvation in Niger and the AIDS scourge in southern Africa. But in between upsurges of attention to Africa, Americans nearly forget that the continent exists. If we did pay attention, we might respond to crises in the making when something substantial could be done to avert them. But “there’s no footage in famine forecasts,” says Sarasohn. “The real problem with our AADD is that the people who have it aren’t the ones who suffer from it” (RNS, August 15).

Strong evidence: Evidence for biological causation for homosexuality led Rob Schenk, a prominent evangelical leader in Washington, D.C., to tell a large gathering of young evangelicals that he had come to the conclusion that homosexuality is not a choice, but rather something deeply rooted in some humans. His “conversion” came about as the result of extensive conversations with genetic researchers and psychologists. He still believes that evangelicals should oppose homosexual behavior, but he admits that “many evangelicals are living in a . . . state of denial”

about causation. He concludes that “if it’s inevitable that this scientific evidence is coming, we have to be prepared with a loving response. If we don’t have one, [evangelicals] won’t have any credibility” (*Boston Globe*, August 14).

Poets make good citizens: At one of the late poet William Stafford’s poetry readings, after he had read a poem which seemed like simple speech, someone from the audience piped up: “I could have written that.” To which Stafford responded, “But you didn’t.” After a pregnant pause, he added: “But you *could* write your own” (Kim Stafford, *Early Morning*, Graywolf Press). Ted Kooser, former poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, expresses a similar thought: “Considering the ways in which so many of us waste our time, what would be wrong with a world in which *everybody* were writing poems? After all, there’s a significant service to humanity in spending time doing no harm. While you’re writing your poem, there’s one less scoundrel in the world. And I’d like a world, wouldn’t you, in which people actually took time to think about what they were saying? It would be, I’m certain, a more peaceful, more reasonable place” (*The Poetry Home Repair Manual*, University of Nebraska Press).

Religion is the real thing: In a tribute to the late Peter Jennings, anchorman at ABC News, Steven Waldman of beliefnet recalls an interview beliefnet did with Jennings in 2000, in which Jennings explained how he took religion seriously as a journalist. “I try to tell young producers . . . that when they go to interview the survivors of a plane crash, and they ask the woman, ‘How did you get through this?’ and the woman answers, ‘God got me through it,’ they are never to then say, ‘I understand that, madam, but what really got you through it?’” When Jennings was asked whether he thought he was put on earth for a purpose, he said he didn’t think it was to be a journalist who seeks truth. Rather, he was put here to be a father.

They said it...

It’s a mind-blowing concept that the God who created the universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people, but the thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between grace and karma. . . . Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I’ve done a lot of stupid stuff.

—Bono, lead singer of the rock group U2, in Michka Assayas, *Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas* (Riverhead)

How many readers of Edith Wharton have engaged in terroristic acts? I challenge you to name one. Therefore, the reading of Edith Wharton is a proven deterrent to terror. Do we need to wait until our cities lie in smoking ruins before we wake up to the fact that a first-class public library is a vital link in national defense?

—Garrison Keillor, arguing for better funding of public libraries (Tribune Media Services)

Get the facts...

As the late senator Patrick Moynihan said, “everyone is entitled to his own opinion but not to his own set of facts.” Here are some facts about Social Security:

- Without Social Security about half of the elderly would live below the poverty line.
- For two-thirds of the elderly SS provides the majority of their income. For one-third it provides nearly all their income.
- SS does more to reduce poverty among children than any government program other than the Earned Income Tax Credit. It lifted 1 million children above the poverty line in 2002.
- SS is particularly helpful to women, who make up 57 percent of adult beneficiaries. They pay 39 percent of SS payroll taxes, yet receive 50 percent of the benefits.
- SS is an efficient government program, with administrative costs at only 0.6 percent of retirement and survivors benefits.

—Center on Budget and Policy Priorities