

BCA Dispatch

Newsletter of the
Boston-Cambridge Alliance for Democracy

January
2005

My mind is still reeling from how crazy this all is, the only thing to make the news was the back-slapping of the swearing in [of Congress members]. What a nice show of bi-partisanship, that will last until the confirmation hearings for judges and then the Democrats will be sent to the cloak room—idiots. If you are going to be treated badly anyway, why not go out fighting?

—Faye Morrison, Ayer MA Selectman

ALLIANCE NEWS (Continued on Page 8)

Chapter Calendar

* * *Should We Secede?* * *

Boston-Cambridge Alliance for Democracy will meet on **Wednesday, January 26th (yes, 26th)** at 7:00 p.m. at **Cambridge Friends Meeting house**, 5 Longfellow Park (9-minute walk from Harvard Square T station, west on Brattle St.)

— Agenda —

When American colonists couldn't get King George III to grant them autonomy, they declared independence—then fought to oust the occupying officials and troops. Should we in New England do the same with King George W?

Come discuss the pros and cons of secession, autonomy, and independence with **Jim Hogue & Ben Scotch** (discussant) of Montpelier, VT. (Vermont was an independent country 1777-1791.) Jim is a teacher & radio activist; Ben is a civil liberties lawyer; both are election-fraud fighters.

— Refreshments —

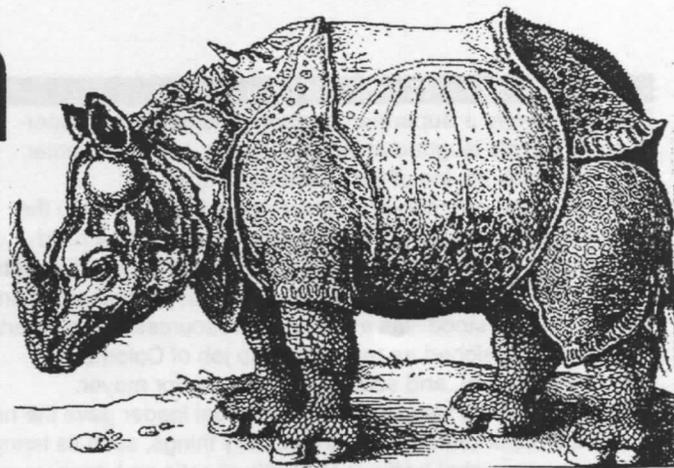
Zany Mayor Inspires Fun & Progress Bogotá Elects New Moral Leadership

by *María Cristina Caballero, Harvard Gazette, 11 March 2004*

Mathematician and philosopher Antanas Mockus had just resigned from the top job at Colombian National University. He looked around for another big challenge and found it: to be in charge of "a 6.5-million-person classroom"—the city of Bogotá.

Mockus, who had no political experience, ran for mayor of Bogotá. He was successful mainly because people in Colombia's capital city saw him as an honest guy. With an educator's inventiveness, Mockus turned Bogotá into a social experiment just as the city was choked with violence, lawless traffic, corruption, and gangs of street children who mugged and stole. It was a city perceived by some to be on the verge of chaos.

People were desperate for a change, for a moral leader of some sort. The eccentric Mockus, who communicates through symbols, humor, and metaphors, filled the role. When many hated the disordered and disorderly city of (Continued on Page 2>>)



"Rhinocervs", Albrecht Dürer, 1517

Ionesco and the Corporate Empire Dining With the GOP Rhinos

by *Joe Bageant, Counterpunch, 4-6 December 2004*

Thanks to an online friend, I recently rediscovered Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*—the one about being fully human in a totalitarian state. Berenger, the play's protagonist, is a humanist stranded in a society slowly becoming monsters. Rhinoceroses to be exact, a symbol for a herding mindless ugliness in an unthinking stampede. Ultimately Berenger is the last pink flesh-and-blood man left in a stampeding rhinoceros herd, and comes to grasp that the stampede itself is what it is all about. It is the stampede, the mindless charging off together that causes the metamorphosis of people into rhinos.

Americans at the time, 1959, saw *Rhinoceros* as a play about their favorite theme, individualism. Ionesco tried to tell critics that it was a play "not merely against conformism but mainly about totalitarianism," and that the very notion of a government or state proclaiming individualism as one of its national virtues is in itself absurd. To which U.S. critics replied that totalitarianism cannot happen here because America is a nation of individualists, thus proving Ionesco's point. Whatever the case, I had drinks and bar food with the rhinos last night at a bar called King Harry's (not the real name) and I can assure you they are having the time of their lives, snorting and bellowing and charging everything in sight.

King Harry's is not the working class tavern I usually patronize, but one of those faux English pubs frequented by local business types, which here in Virginia is to say blood spitting neo-conservative Republicans. Rhinos of the first order who want to kill and eat liberals and reduce such threatening enemies as France to a glowing cinder. Though I generally avoid King Harry's—a man can stomach only so much jingoism at a sitting—I am nevertheless popular there as an object of derision, being an ultra-liberal, and Republican rhino lives being so in need of entertainment. Thus, when they get a genuine socialist at the table, it is like having an unarmed space alien drop in for a beer.

Unfortunately, it never stops at one drink and always ends up in a near fist fight, although throwing drinks in each others faces is about as close as it ever comes between a bunch of overweight aging old sots like us. (Continued on Page 4>>)

ZANY MAYOR (Continued from Page 1)

Bogotá, he wore a Superman costume and acted as "Super-citizen". People laughed at Mockus' antics, but the laughter began to break the ice of their extreme skepticism.

Mockus, the only son of a Lithuanian artist, burst onto the Colombian political scene in 1993 when, faced with a rowdy auditorium of the school of arts' students, he dropped his pants and mooned them to gain quiet. The gesture, he said at the time, should be understood "as a part of the resources which an artist can use." He resigned as rector, the top job of Colombian National University, and soon decided to run for mayor.

The fact that he was seen as an unusual leader gave the new mayor the opportunity to try extraordinary things, such as hiring 420 mimes to control traffic in Bogotá's chaotic and dangerous streets. He launched a "Night for Women" and asked the city's men to stay home in the evening and care for the children; 700,000 women went out on the first of three nights that Mockus dedicated to them.

When there was a water shortage, Mockus appeared on TV programs taking a shower and turning off the water as he soaped, asking his fellow citizens to do the same. In just two months people were using 14 percent less water, a savings that increased when people realized how much money they were also saving because of economic incentives approved by Mockus; water use is now 40 percent less than before the shortage.

"The distribution of knowledge is the key contemporary task," Mockus said. "Knowledge empowers people. If people know the rules, and are sensitized by art, humor, and creativity, they are much more likely to accept change."

He also asked people to pay 10 percent extra in voluntary taxes. To the surprise of many, 63,000 people voluntarily paid the extra taxes. A dramatic indicator of the shift in the attitude of *Bogotanos* during Mockus' tenure is that, in 2002, the city collected more than three times the revenues it had garnered in 1990.

Another Mockus inspiration was to ask people to call his office if they found a kind and honest taxi driver; 150 people called and the mayor organized a meeting with all those good taxi drivers, who advised him about how to improve the behavior of mean taxi drivers. The good taxi drivers were named "Knights of the Zebra," a club supported by the mayor's office.

Yet Mockus doesn't like to be called a leader. "There is a tendency to be dependent on individual leaders," he said. "To me, it is important to develop collective leadership. I don't like to get credit for all that we achieved. Millions of people contributed to the results that we achieved ... I like more egalitarian relationships. I especially like to orient people to learn." . . .

Most important to Mockus was his campaign about the importance and sacredness of life. "In a society where human life has lost value," he said, "there cannot be another priority than re-establishing respect for life as the main right and duty of citizens." Mockus sees the reduction of homicides from 80 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1993 to 22 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2003 as a major achievement, noting also that traffic fatalities dropped by more than half in the same time period, from an average of 1,300 per year to about 600. Contributing to this success was the mayor's inspired decision to paint stars on the spots where pedestrians (1,500 of them) had been killed in traffic accidents.

Here are a few more innovations from Antanas Mockus' two mayoral terms: He mobilized people to protest against violence and terrorist attacks. He invented a "vaccine against violence," asking people to draw the faces of the people who had hurt them

on balloons, which they then popped. About 50,000 people participated in this campaign.

Voluntary disarmament days were held in December 1996 and again in 2003. Though less than 1 percent of the firearms in the city were given up, homicides fell by 26 percent, thanks in part to the attention given to the program by the media. The percentage of people who think that it is better to have firearms in order to protect themselves fell from 24.8 percent in 2001 to 10.4 percent in 2003.

Mockus noted that his administrations were enlightened by academic concepts, including the work of Nobel Prize-winning economist Douglass North, who has investigated the tension between formal and informal rules and how economic development is restrained when those rules clash; and Jürgen Habermas' work on how dialogue creates social capital. Mockus also mentions Socrates, who said that if people understood well, they probably would not act in the wrong way.

Luis Eduardo Garzón, the new mayor of Bogotá, is the first leftist who has been in charge of the second-most important political position in Colombia. Said Mockus, "His election expresses a consensus around the importance of addressing social issues. Garzón has the challenge of opening space to new political forces in a country that has been dominated by a '*bipartidismo bobo*' (dumb two-party system)."



Bogotá traffic mime flashes "INCORRECTO"

Salem Activist Discovers Why Senators Cave In

I just called as a constituent, and asked whoever answered the phone if Ted will help Rep. Conyers with the Ohio problems
Aide: NOPE.

Me: What's more important to our democracy than making sure all votes get counted?

Aide: At this time there is no evidence that deliberate wrong-doing happened.

Me: Then, what's the harm in having a look?

Aide: Sen. Kennedy does not want to run the risk of being weakened by taking a stand on this position.

Me: What risk? There is NO CHANCE Sen. Kennedy won't be re-elected in Massachusetts. Why not make a stand?

Aide: The risk is from being weakened in the senate because of this.

Me: Tell him: There is no reward without risk, and doing the right thing does not always mean you win... grow a spine!..

—Benjamin Greenberg, Salem

Globalization's Dr. Strangelove New Military Structure to Dominate World

by Bruce Gagnon, www.space4peace.org, 6 Jan 2005

Pentagon transformation is well underway. The U.S. military is increasingly being converted into a *global oil protection service*. Secretary of War Donald Rumsfeld has a "strategy guy" whose job is to teach this new way of warfare to high-level military officers from all branches of services and to top level CIA operatives. Thomas Barnett is a former professor at the Navy War College in Rhode Island. He is author of the controversial book *The Pentagon's New Map* that identifies a "non-integrating gap" in the world that is resisting corporate globalization. Barnett defines the gap as parts of Latin America, Africa, Middle East and Central Asia all of which are key oil-producing regions of the world.

In what Barnett calls a "Grand March of History" he claims that the U.S. military must be transformed in order to preemptively take control of the gap, so the U.S. can "manage" the global distribution of resources, people, energy, and money. (It has long been predicted that the gap between rich and poor around the world will continue to widen and that the Pentagon will be used to keep the boot on the necks of the people of the third world to the benefit of corporate globalization.)

Barnett predicts that U.S. unilateralism will lead to the "inevitability of war." Referring to Hitler in a recent presentation, Barnett reminded his military audience that the Nazi leader never asked for permission before invading other countries. Thus, the end to multi-lateralism.

Barnett argues that the days of arms talks and international treaties are over. "There is no secret where we are going," he says as he calls for a "new ordering principle" at the Department of Defense (DoD). Barnett maintains that as jobs move out of the U.S. the primary export product of the nation will be "security." Global energy demand will necessitate U.S. control of the oil producing regions. "We will be fighting in Central Africa in 20 years," Barnett predicts.

In order to implement this new military vision," Barnett maintains that the U.S. military must move away from its often-competing mix of Air Force-Navy-Army-Marines toward two basic military services. One he names *Leviathan*, which he defines as the kick ass, wage war, special ops, and not under the purview of the international criminal court. Give us your angry, video game-playing 18-19 year olds, for the Leviathan force, Barnett says. Once a country is conquered by Leviathan, Barnett says the U.S. will have to have a second military force that he calls *Systems Administration*. This force he describes as the "proconsul" of the empire, boots on the ground, the police force to control the local populations. This group, Barnett says, "will never come home."

Barnett's plan is essentially underway today. New fast, flexible, and efficient projection forces with "lily pad" bases are now being developed for control of the gap. Over the next decade, the military will abandon 35% of the Cold War-era bases it uses abroad as it seeks to expand the network of bare-bones sites in the gap. The planned changes, once completed, will result in the most profound "reordering" of U.S. military forces overseas since the current global arrangements were set 50 years ago.

According to Michael Klare, professor of Peace Studies at

Hampshire College, "American troops are now risking their lives on a daily basis to protect the flow of petroleum. In Colombia, Saudi Arabia, and the Republic of Georgia, U.S. personnel are spending their days and nights protecting pipelines and refineries, or supervising the local forces assigned to this mission."



Dr. Barnett

Klare continues, "The DoD has stepped up its arms deliveries to military forces in Angola and Nigeria, and is helping to train their officers and enlisted personnel; meanwhile, Pentagon officials have begun to look for permanent bases in the area, focusing on Senegal, Ghana, Mali, Uganda and Kenya." The Wall Street Journal has reported that "a key mission for U.S. forces (in Africa) would be to ensure that Nigeria's oil fields, which in the future could account for as much as 25% of all U.S. oil imports, are secure."

National Guard units across the U.S. are now being assigned the task of developing on-going basing relationships with each nation on the African continent.

Role of Space Technology

The Bush administration is also exploring the possibility of expanding the emerging missile defense system into Eastern Europe as an element in the strategic containment of Russia, China and the Middle East. The Pentagon has been negotiating with Hungary, Romania, Poland and the Czech Republic about one or more of them hosting new missile defense bases. Oil-rich Iran is to be encircled by missile defense posts in Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

In order to pull all of this together the Pentagon claims it will need "a God's-eye view" of the world. A new "internet in the sky" is now being built for the wars of the future. Costing well over \$200 billion, the new web would give war machines and military forces a common language, instantly emitting an encyclopedia of lethal information about all enemies.

According to Art Cebrowski, director of the Pentagon's Office of Force Transformation, "What we are really talking about is a new theory of war." The military wants to know "everything of interest to us, all the time," says one Pentagon insider. Military intelligence including secret satellite surveillance covering most of the Earth will be posted on the war net and shared with troops. "The essence of *net-centric warfare* is our ability to deploy a war-fighting force anywhere, anytime. Information technology is the key to that."

Thus U.S. military and economic control of the gap will be dependent on a system of networked computers. Fusing weapons, secret intelligence and soldiers in a global network what the military calls net-centric warfare will, they say, change the military in a way the Internet changed business and culture.

Bruce K. Gagnon is coordinator of Global Network Against Weapons & Nuclear Power in Space based in Brunswick ME. They invite you to attend "Full Spectrum Resistance: An Int'l Space Organizing Forum" in New York NY on April 30, 1-9pm. globalnet@mindspring.com 207-729-0517

RHINOCEROS (Continued from Page 1)

I kid you not. I've had my own martini thrown in my face on occasion, and the bartender is so conditioned she sometimes brings me a bar towel when the pitch of the conversation reaches a certain level.

Anyway, given the sort of university graduates states such as Virginia grind out, they tend to equate socialism with Joseph Stalin and the Democratic Party with "urban liberals." Urban liberal is of course one to those conservative code words for "taking everything away from working white people and giving it to non-working welfare niggers and porto-rikkins up nawth in the big cities." Which is why it really frosts my ass to hear Democratic leadership saying that in the next presidential election they will need a candidate from the South, a Clinton or an Edwards, in order to win. A Southern Democrat is simply a free trade capitalist Republican who has renounced lynching and comes carrying an armload of southern charm. (Any readers who think Clinton was a real liberal can bail out here.) We Southerners learn early how to cover our darkness with Southern smarm. Erudition with a Southern accent works on nearly everybody—sort of a Shelby Foote, William Faulkner, southern gentleman mythology game we run on Yankees and each other. The whole world actually.

But underneath it is sheer conservative meanness in most cases, something Southerners by no measure have a franchise on, but do better than most people. Southern meanness has experienced a renaissance in the last few decades because of the unholy alliance of GOP corporatist America with fundamentalist Christianity, and the sheer bald-faced aggression of neo-conservatism these days. Urban liberals just do not understand how absolutely mean Republican heartlanders, under the tutelage of Southerners, have become over the years. Northern and coastal liberal failure to grasp this is understandable. For reasons of diversity, this sort of aggregate meanness is not as common in big urban centers. It requires a certain critical mass of repressed homophobic, Christian white people who feel threatened by everything, plus gobs of money and guns to make it manifest. We've got it all here honey, and there is no rhino meaner than the Southern rhino.

OK. Just how mean are we talking about? Blind stupid mean. Meaner than a goddam sack of snakes. Here is a sample of standard rhino conversation, which I have clipped from the local online forum so as to be completely accurate in quoting them. But these quotes are from the very same people who say the very same things night after night at King Harry's and actually believe what they say. I remind you that these are some of the better sort of rhinos in this town, rhinos who own businesses, professional rhinos, etc. You do not want to meet the real wooly boogers.

—Who cares what the rest of the world thinks of us? They do not live here and they do not count!

—The United States will be forced to engage in tactical low yield nuclear attacks, in particular against Iran & North Korea.

—I support the complete destruction of Arab/Muslim culture and nationality. The complete destruction of their capitol cities and money centers. Then we will see how long they taunt us.

—Put an end to all this stupid political correctness crap and the and simply beat some sense into those who don't comply. The hell with what the euro tribal councils whine.

And my personal favorite rhinism of all:

—If Americans stand together and quit questioning themselves so much we can rule the world. But all this liberal

whining is ruining American business here and abroad.

Huh?

Mostly the rhinos are practical, artless animals in a rush to do necessary and useful things, all of which involve money. Or as Ionesco put it: "a prisoner of necessity, who cannot understand that a thing might perhaps be without usefulness; nor does he understand that, at bottom, it is the useful that may be a useless and back-breaking burden. If one does not understand the usefulness of the useless and the uselessness of the useful, one cannot understand art. And a country where art is not understood is a country of slaves and robots..."

"...the very stampede itself is the most telling and tragic of all arguments. For when Berenger considers going out into the street 'to try to convince them,' he realizes that he 'would have to learn their language.' He looks in the mirror and sees that he no longer resembles anyone. He searches madly for a photograph of people as they were before the big change. But now humanity itself has become incredible, as well as hideous. To be the last man in the rhinoceros herd is, in fact, to be a monster. Such is the problem which Ionesco sets us in his tragic irony: *solitude and dissent become more and more impossible, more and more absurd.*"

— Thomas Merton's essay, *The Rain and the Rhinoceros*

Dissent? We wish! Judging from the run-of-the-mill American liberals I see here in the Washington D.C. area, liberals think voting Democratic, giving fifty bucks to the ACLU and dropping down at the National Mall once a year to observe someone else's protest is enough to maintain their credentials. Nevertheless, some very ordinary middle class liberals are finally feeling like Berenger. Starting to feel that creepy sense of alienation (the kind that we American lefties have become used to) catching a whiff of what smells like approaching totalitarianism. This has been very hard for white collar liberals who pride themselves on balanced judgment and restraint from political excess. But ever since the suspect skin-of-the-teeth reelection of George Bush, I have been able to coax honest confessions of fear out of at least a few mainstream Democrats around the company water cooler. These are the Toyota and Volvo driving liberals whose most adventurous move in any given week may be parking one space over from their usual spot in the company parking lot. (That this daring move always draws comment should give you some idea of the quiet desperation of publishing work in this country.) A few of these meek liberals are starting to smell the fear, catch the scent of the herd.

But they need more evidence. Liberals always need more facts. After all, nothing appears much different since the November elections. We get up in the morning and everything is the same as when we went to bed. We still have our jobs and the mortgage still comes due on the first of the month. Television is as bad as ever. Yet, something has changed. One keeps one's opinions more to one's self these days. There is something in the air they cannot quite put their finger upon, and if one cannot name the beast, well then, it's best not to comment on it lest people think you are starting to fray at the edges, becoming aberrant. And besides, in looking around, nobody else seems overly upset except a few aberrant types on the Internet. When I stop to consider those rare occasions when I have been prescient in any meaningful way about American society—and there have been damned few—I have felt like an

aberrant. Hell, I am aberrant. Most of us on these sorts of web-sites are. But what is aberrant in a society that watches 6000 murders a year on TV for entertainment? That spends more money on hard-on drugs and personal ammo than it does on child nutrition? I've come to accept feeling aberrant most of the time. But as a former dope fiend, thrice divorced, ex-Jesus freak, part-time drunkard socialist malcontent, I can safely say that what is happening around us is aberrant even by MY standards. I mean hell, failure of liberals to notice the growth of an entire red state savanna land out here coursing with rhinoceroses is weird.

Calling weird, weird is very hard for educated liberals. Most have nice lives, either in the middle class or perhaps living comfortably amid less affluent but intelligent and artistic circles. Others are middle class educators and such, raising families among decent open-minded friends in a community of like souls. Of course some do smell the fear. But they think that if they remain invisible and deny any such thoughts they will escape the trampling of the herd.

Then too, acknowledging that we have devolved into a one-party rhinoid system, the party of business, but with two wings, Dem and GOP, would put the average American liberal in the position of having to take action. Or not. And let's face the truth about modern middle class American liberals—they are a rather gutless lot who would not take to the streets no matter how bad things get. That is all but impossible when your house is on a good street and your kids' college fund is in place, even if it took a second mortgage to pay for it. Denial is easier, as was proved when the so-called American left failed to rise up when the 2000 elections were rigged, something which doesn't even fly in the Ukraine these days, as was proved by its massive protest of similar elections there. Yet I must admit, to stand up in the face of a rhino herd takes a lot of ass. Maybe denial buys enough time to get the kids through school and mortgage paid off before the rhinos tear up the lawn. Denial can sometimes work, but only if you are buying time for yourself.

Being raised in the American South, I am practically an expert on denial. We live in denial of such things as the Civil War being about slavery, that tobacco causes cancer and that global warming is real. Otherwise we would have to cop to the Enlightenment's proposition that man can advance through discovery and critical thought, and we are not about to do that. We prefer the hierarchy of feudalism, including the new global corporate feudalism. In fact, we maintained our denial of the American social contract long enough that we managed to win the "battle for America's soul" in the last election. We helped make rhinoceros dominant so America can now charge back into some murky past dubbed "traditional values," rolling up the Enlightenment in the process.

At the same time there are faint signs that some liberal Americans are more alarmed than most of my middle aged editor friends around the water cooler. There were those internet and television news stories about a rise in the number of Americans visiting Canadian emigration/citizenship websites. And though there has been no mass exodus, there is the sneaking suspicion that what people think about doing, they eventually do—or at least some of them anyway. Also, it takes time to collect one's life to emigrate. In fact, escaping a corporation that passes itself off as a nation, one based upon citizen consumer debt, is not nearly as easy as it looks. So we'll have to wait and see how many citizens are how serious.

Hard cases such as myself and the readers of websites like

this one [www.Counterpunch.org] have railed and ranted about the rise of the rhinos for some time now. But to be honest, I sometimes doubt myself, just like those middle-of-the-road liberals. Like theirs, my senses do not perceive much physical change. I get up and brush my teeth and every day is the same as the day before. I look over at my sleeping wife, who is untroubled by any of the impending political specters that so often haunt me. And I wonder, am I nuts? Have I finally fallen off the precipice over which I have so long stared? After all, the dog still chews the corner of the carpet if I don't keep an eye on him. Are not these the things of ordinary earthly life? Maybe I should be paying more attention to the mundane stuff which any reflective person knows constitutes most of living.

Then that national creepiness, the distant rumble of the herd, rattles me again. So next spring I am shopping hard for a house in Andalucia, or St. Kitts, or Normandy, places where there are still secular humanists political parties of the type the rhinos see as the heart of evil. Hopefully, places with no Wal-Mart—yet. Places where life involves buying vegetables without plastic wrappers and cooking them yourself, and drinking wine late on a weeknight with good friends because you do not get up at 5 a.m. to commute in the herd of other useful citizens, and if I am lucky, never owning a car or a television again. In other words, living life with the bark still on it and watching American politics from a safe distance. Unpatriotic, I admit. But patriotism is merely nationalism under another guise and this belly-of-the-beast political stuff belongs to younger men than me. If as is claimed, American politics are a pendulum, then that swing has been a mighty damned short one of late, somewhere between corporate feudalism abroad, and a domestic form in which rhinos happily play video games and watch football while their kids charge around on the ever expanding rhino empire's wars for oil and turf and more slave labor.

Call me hyperbolic if you want, paranoid even. But millions of people with swollen bellies around the planet are nodding yes, along with all those unemployed youths in Fallujah, and Mindanao, and Bolivia, loading AK clips, in anticipation of bagging an American rhino.

Joe Bageant is a writer and magazine editor living in Winchester, Virginia. bageantjb@netscape.net

Editor's note: If you like Ionesco's "Rhinoceros", wait 'til you read/see "The Firebugs" by Max Frisch, Swiss, of the same era.

The 23rd Sigh

(Thanks to Amy Hendrickson for forwarding)

Bush is my shepherd; I dwell in want.

He maketh logs to be cut down in national forests.

He leadeth trucks into the still wilderness.

He restoreth my fears.

He leadeth me in the paths of international disgrace for his ego's sake.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of pollution and war,
I will find no exit, for thou art in office.*

*Thy tax cuts for the rich, thy media control, they discomfort me.
Thou preparest an agenda of deception in the presence of thy religion.*

Thou anointest my head with foreign oil.

My health insurance runneth out.

Surely megalomania and false patriotism shall follow me all the days of thy term,

And my jobless child shall dwell in my basement forever.

Talking With A Republican Getting to Understanding and Community

by Eugene F. Provenzo Jr. and Jack Thompson,
Christian Science Monitor, 19 Oct 2004

Neil Simon's play, "The Odd Couple," is about two men who share an apartment and seem to have nothing in common. Yet despite their differences they develop an enduring friendship. The two of us are a bit like Mr. Simon's characters - seemingly diametrically opposed because of our politics, but ultimately closely aligned as friends and collaborators.

We were brought together by CBS's "60 Minutes" program, which had been looking for experts to provide insight concerning the 1999 Columbine massacre - we're experts in the social impact of video games.

We suspect that the two of us were selected by the program because our obvious social and political differences would make good TV. Gene is a liberal Democrat with a strong interest in social justice, and Jack a Republican and Christian conservative. Gene is a university professor trained as a social scientist and humanist and is focused on research and reflection. Jack is an attorney focused on public interest law and activism.

But our common ground is a shared belief that first-person shooter video games are bad for our children, teaching them to act aggressively and providing them with efficient killing skills and romanticized and trivialized scenarios for killing in the real world.

By strange coincidence, we live down the street from each other.

Our first meeting took place over breakfast on neutral ground - a local bagel shop. We were cautious with each other. Jack expected Gene to consider him a right-wing lunatic, and Gene was afraid of being labeled a bleeding-heart liberal. But as we began to listen to one another, the stereotypes fell aside and we found that despite our differences, we had a great deal in common - concerns about the encroachment of big business on government and the gap between rich and poor, for example.

We discovered a mutual sense that there is something fundamentally wrong about the winner-take-all philosophy that seems to dominate American life and politics. Both of us felt that there isn't enough discussion in American society about the common good; that collaboration, the idea of working toward mutual goals despite differences of opinion, is almost unheard of; that most politics and policy debate is mean-spirited and intolerant (which was the chief reason we were guarded at first about opening up to each other).

Much as conservative William F. Buckley and liberal John Kenneth Galbraith famously became friends years before us, we've cautiously become friends and collaborators - collaborators not just on videogame policy, but also on issues such as the environment, race, and gender.

Our friends and colleagues seem unable to imagine how we tolerate each other's widely differing social and political values.

Jack, for example, is opposed to abortion while Gene believes that a woman should have the right to choose. But Jack's faith-based perspective on the issue doesn't preclude him from constructive conversation aimed at understanding Gene, who Jack has learned, through listening, is a person of goodwill. In carefully listening to each other we are forced to realize we have neither absolute nor complete answers and that other perspectives have

validity. Even if we profoundly disagree on abortion, it doesn't preclude us from having a dialogue on this and other issues that may be as important or more important. Absolutist attitudes preclude democratic interaction.

We have different heroes. One of Jack's favorite figures in American history is the editor and anti-communist Whittaker Chambers.

At first, Gene couldn't believe someone could consider him a hero. After hearing Jack talk about him, and doing some research on his own, Gene realized that Chambers was a much more interesting and complex figure than he had first thought. Gene's appreciation of Jack's heroes not only makes Jack more human, but brings into view what may be heroic about both Chambers and Jack.

While he still doesn't admire Chambers the way Jack does, Gene understands some of the things that Jack finds admirable about him.

We both look forward to getting together and the intellectual intrigue of exploring each others' opinions. Our discussions tend to be more interesting than the ones we have with friends and colleagues from our own ideological niches.

We talk a lot. —We listen. —And we learn.

We've come to believe that the political spectrum is something of a myth - artificially created to serve political rather than social and democratic purposes.

We're more interested in our common ground than in our differences, and have benefited from each other's insights and different points of view because it forces us to test our own assumptions. By talking with each other, we allow ourselves the potential to be persuaded.

We both love our country, which is common ground worth occupying together.

If you're uncomfortable in the din of this uncivil political season, we have a suggestion: Don't demonize your opponents or let them demonize you - ignorance of one another, by definition, stops democratic discourse. Winning is no victory if we destroy all sense of community and concern for the common good.

Americans love to talk about the nation's historic tradition of tolerance and compromise. But as a people, they seem less caring and less tolerant than their rhetoric suggests.

Instead of isolating themselves, Americans would do well to listen to some of one another's TV newscasts and radio stations, and to read a range of newspaper and magazine articles. Conservative radio commentators such as Rush Limbaugh talk largely to the converted, as does a liberal commentator like Randi Rhodes at the other end of the political spectrum. While we might agree in principle with some of what they say, they stop the discourse.

The public square ought to be a venue in which the truth is sought, rather than opponents bloodied for sport. Talking about our common concerns first and our differences second keeps discourse going.

In our case, we believe we've created an effective and meaningful dialogue about one area of common interest between us - video games and the needs of our children. That point of earnest contact creates understanding on a range of issues we might not agree on.

Similarly, Americans might be more productive in addressing the pressing issues of our time if healthy discourse were allowed. No one, for example, can argue that the war in Iraq,

the crisis in healthcare and insurance, the growing disparity between haves and have-nots, the threat of terrorism, or the increasing deterioration of the natural environment are issues that do not affect us all.

If you are really concerned about what is happening in American society, if you are really worried about our direction and purpose as a nation, we invite you to engage yourself in dialogues and discussions with people who are fundamentally different from you - or at least appear to be.

Surrounding yourself only with like-minded individuals is ultimately an isolating experience.

We suggest that you reach beyond your own ideological clique and talk to someone who truly thinks differently from you. In the common ground that you'll almost certainly find with others will be the issues that you can potentially take action on together to help create a better nation.

• Eugene F. Provenzo Jr. is a professor in the social and cultural foundations of education at the University of Miami. Jack Thompson is a public interest lawyer. They are collaborating on a book, 'Public Nuisance,' which provides techniques for the average citizen to become more politically and socially active.

This is one of 8 articles articles on constructive dialogue at www.csmonitor.com/commentary/conversations.html



LETTERS

NASA's "Deep Impact" Project; \$240M Misdirected

The US has the disdainful distinction of having been first to have developed and used the atomic bomb. With NASA's launch of "Deep Impact" we are on our way to having the future dishonor of being first to blast weapons in space. In 1999 the project was approved for a cost of \$240 million to develop a new space mission to fire a 1,100 pound bomb into a comet to create a crater as big as a football field and as deep as a seven story building. The launch date was set for January 2005 with an anticipated explosion in July 2005. NASA proudly offers website information on the project, neglecting to mention its militaristic connection.

When will our nation's love of war toys end? Is this the part of our military's plan for "Full Spectrum Dominance?" Instead of giving billions of dollars to NASA so the "boys" can build bombs to blow up craters in space, we could give scientists money to develop and install a system of buoys in the Indian Ocean that could help predict a future Tsunami and save hundreds of thousands of lives. Wouldn't this be a better use of our tax dollars?

—Virginia Pratt, Jamaica Plain

Ed. Comment: "The Deep Impact mission is the first to explore a comet's interior by using a spacecraft to create a crater, allowing

us to look deep inside. Dramatic images from both the flyby spacecraft and the impactor will be sent back to distant Earth as data in near-realtime. These first-ever views deep beneath a comet's surface, and additional scientific measurements will provide clues to the formation of the solar system. Amateur astronomers will combine efforts with astronomers at larger telescopes to offer the public an earth-based look at this incredible July 2005 encounter with a comet." —NASA info.

This NASA probe will not explode a bomb on the comet, but crash an 800-pound copper "impactor" into it's surface at 22,000 mph, making a crater and throwing up unknown interior material for inspection. Our reader correctly observes that military implications are avoided in NASA's story. We recall that the Wright Brothers from the beginning strove to create a military airplane, and contracted with the US Army to develop one speedy enough. (Ref: [A History of Bombing](#), by Sven Lindqvist). How many Americans have ever heard that? —Ed.

Thirty Things To Do before the presidential inaugural in January

1. Get that abortion.
2. Drink a glass of nice clean water.
3. Cash your social security check.
4. See a doctor of your own choosing.
5. Spend quality time with your draft-age child/grandchild.
6. Get that gas mask you've been putting off buying.
7. Hoard gasoline.
8. Borrow books from library before they're banned—
Constitutional law books, Catcher in the Rye, Harry Potter, Tropic of Cancer, etc.
9. If you have an idea for an art piece involving a crucifix—do it now.
10. Come out of the closet -- then go back in -- HURRY!
11. Jam in all the stem cell research you can.
12. Stay out late before the curfews start.
13. Go see Bruce Springsteen before he has his "accident."
14. Go see Mount Rushmore before the Reagan addition.
15. Use the phrase: "You can't do that—this is America!"
16. If you're white, marry a black person. If you're black, marry a white person.
17. Eat at a Persian restaurant.
18. Take a walk in Yosemite, without being hit by a snowmobile or a logging truck.
19. Enroll your kid in an accelerated art or music class.
20. Start your school day without a prayer.
21. Pass on the secrets of evolution to future generations.
22. Learn French.
23. Attend a commitment ceremony of your gay friends.
24. Take a factory tour anywhere in the US.
25. Take photos of animals on the endangered species list.
26. Visit Florida before the polar ice caps melt.
27. Visit Nevada before it becomes radioactive.
28. Visit Alaska before "The Big Spill."
29. Visit Massachusetts while it is still a state.
30. Visit your neighborhood mosque.

(Thanks to Jill Frazier for forwarding)

CHAPTER AND ALLIANCE NEWS

Exploring MoveOn

The on-line activist group MoveOn, managed by a dozen young people in New York, raised millions of dollars for progressive pressure including the defeat of George W Bush. Most recently they pressed for at least one US senator to stand up and refuse to accept the Ohio electoral college votes for Bush. They count themselves successful since Sen. Barbara Boxer of Oakland CA did stand up, forcing the House and Senate to debate the unfairness of the 2004 election. Of course the Bush "win" could not be upset because the Republican majority in the House would have the last word in case Ohio votes were rejected. But many consider the behavior of House and Senate Democrats to be craven and shameful because few non-Black reps stood up and only one (Black) senator, despite 57,000 voter complaints compiled by Rep. Conyers and colleagues in the House Judiciary Committee.

BCA members became involved in this short-term challenge to the electoral college vote. Our December chapter meeting hosted **Paul Bernstein** and **Betty North**, who attended MoveOn "house-parties" on 21 November in Boston and Cambridge respectively. **Dave Lewit**, **Cynthia Ritsher**, **Kati Winchell**, and **Enid and Gordon Winchell** attended a MoveOn houseparty in Lincoln, moderated by **Lisa Hallstrom**. Paul, Betty, Dave, and Cynthia pretty much agreed that MoveOn was good at raising money and people to action, but had no consistent programs with clear goals. MoveOn attempted to remedy this at the hundreds of houseparties across the nation, mentioned above, and followup meetings. The most popular, consensual goals were to create a clear mission statement for the progressive movement and to reform the media. Since then the NY group has been silent, but the Lincoln houseparty group, with the same Alliance people present, is moving toward projects like Kati's reading of George Lakoff's *Don't Think of an Elephant* and Dave's suggestion of a Listening Project interacting with people unlike ourselves (see Page 4, this issue). Readers: let us know what's happening with other MoveOn houseparty groups.

Vote Fraud Action

On the day Electoral College delegations met in every state, BCA members **Alice Copeland Brown**, **Charles Johnson** (Falmouth), and **Dave Lewit** (see photo), **Martha Older** and **Heleni Thayre** were among the 40 or so demonstrators outside the State House pressing for renouncing fraudulent votes in Ohio and elsewhere. Many then went inside to witness the MA Electors who, after backing Kerry, wowwed everyone with a resolution to this effect.

On the evening of BCA's December meeting, in an adjoining room, a group of 25—the Coalition Against Election Fraud (CAEF)—planned several actions. **Joanna Herlihy**, **Heleni**, and **Dave** joined others each day up until the Electoral College met on 6 Jan in a vigil outside Sen. Kerry's townhouse at 19 Louisburg Square on Beacon Hill, to urge him to stand up and challenge Ohio votes. The media showed up several times, but the senator toured Iraq,



Charles Johnson, Alice Brown, Dave Lewit

On 3 Jan CAEF packed Faneuil Hall with 8 speakers including Faye Morrison (quote, p.1), Jon Bonifaz and **Jonathan Simon**.

Bioterror Lab

BU's contract with the US government will require approval by Boston's zoning board. Anti-lab leader **Rasheed Khalid**, **Caroline Poinelli**, and **Dave Lewit** among others testified at the board's public hearing on 12 January, at City Hall.

ACTION ALERTS

Thu. 20 Jan. In Washington DC. Join massive protests against the inauguration of George W Bush as president. Buses are available leaving Boston on 19 Jan and returning on 20 Jan. Rallies at Lafayette Park, DuPont Circle, 4th St & Penna Av, &c. Info: Alice Brown 781-575-0054.

Thu. 20 Jan. in Bridgewater MA. Anti-inaugural vigil 5:00pm at town Common and forum at Bridgewater State U at 6:30pm. Info: Bill Haff 508-230-9273 or -3548.

Thu. 20 Jan. Everywhere. "Don't Spend a Dime Day" general retail boycott. Make a down-blip in sales of all consumer goods and services for 24 hours to show them our determination. Starting today, tape a dime to your lapel with a red X—talk it up.

JOIN THE BCA

YOU DON'T HAVE TO LIVE IN BOSTON TO LOVE BCA

Please help us as we fight to make a better future for ourselves and our children -- Join the Boston/Cambridge Alliance for Democracy. (Cut out this form and send it to:

Dave Lewit, 271 Dartmouth St. #2h, Boston, MA 02116.)
BOSTON-CAMBRIDGE ALLIANCE for DEMOCRACY PLEDGE

- ___ \$26/Year - "Count me in!"
- ___ \$52/Year - "Contributor" (We need to average this amount.)
- ___ \$104/Year - "Sustainer" (Helping us thrive.)
- ___ \$208/Year - "Community Steward"
- ___ \$500/Year - "Realize the vision!"
- ___ What's fair for YOU? _\$_____

Name : _____ Date: _____

Street, No./Box/Apt: _____

Town and Zip: _____

Phone: Day _____ Night: _____

E-mail: _____

COLOPHON

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Visit the Alliance web site: www.TheAllianceForDemocracy.org