

Letters to the editor and op-ed pieces by

William Vaughan, Jr., Ph.D.
Chebeague Island, Maine

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Young vs. old in the fight for public benefits

The Washington Post

December 28 at 5:48 PM

In her Dec. 25 op-ed, "[Rage against old folks, not administrators](#)," Catherine Rampell argued that college students should be focusing on issues that hit them financially, specifically the transfers of wealth from them to older people. As she pointed out, a married wage-earner who turns 65 this year can expect to receive Medicare benefits worth six times the amount of money paid into Medicare. It is the young who are going to make up that difference.

However, if the shoe were on the other foot, if younger people were receiving more than they paid at the expense of older people, those younger people would do just what older people are doing. Anyone, in other words, will gladly accept any goods and services for which they do not have to pay.

The real target of the students' ire should be our particular form of representative government, which allows such policies to be voted into law. A constraint, specifying that no one could ever receive more than he or she contributed, would solve the problem without hurting anyone who didn't deserve it.

William Vaughan Jr., Chebeague Island, Maine

Catherine Rampell's angry diatribe against "old folks" was hardly what I expected Christmas morning. Her point was that sensitive, whiny college students should direct their rage at the true monsters of society: their grandparents, who, she believes, are benefiting from "huge . . . intergenerational wealth transfers" in the form of Social Security and Medicare.

Implicit in Ms. Rampell's premise is that her generation would not have racked up the current trillions in debt. I guess if her generation were running the show, we would have balanced budgets and all the old people would be miraculously free of old age, and you could keep all your earnings and not have to pay taxes and all that unfair stuff.

I agree that debt has been accumulated by unwise wars, tax policies and so forth, but blame those who did it, not a demographic. Lest there be any misunderstanding, let me apologize right now for being old and perhaps requiring additional medical care. I would gladly trade places with Ms. Rampell.

A stereotypical portrayal of her parents' generation as takers and her misguided anger toward them are immature.

Roger Kurrus, Aldie

Welfare recipients don't deserve lottery winnings

Portland Press Herald

December 23, 2015

As you report ([“Lawmakers call for legislation to prevent spending of welfare dollars on lottery tickets,”](#) Dec. 16), there is a move to prevent those on public assistance from purchasing lottery tickets. Apparently, since 2010, welfare recipients in Maine have won \$22.4 million by playing the lottery.

However, there is another side to the issue. Maine gets about 22 percent of money spent on the lottery, working out to \$4.8 million out of that \$22.4 million (see Bill Nemitz, [“Lottery’s scavenger hunt targets millennials,”](#) Oct. 25). So the state isn't losing out entirely.

And the simple expedient of checking the welfare status of any winners, and paying the state for welfare benefits already received before awarding any money, would make winners of us all. Since the money in question isn't the recipient's in the first place (according to state Sen. Garrett Mason), surely the winnings shouldn't be entirely theirs either.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

It makes sense to ban purchase of soda and candy with food stamps

Portland Press Herald

November 30, 2015

<http://www.pressherald.com/2015/11/30/maine-voices-it-makes-sense-to-ban-purchase-of-soda-and-candy-with-food-stamps/>

A food-assistance program should have a strict priority of meeting nutritional needs only.

Maine Voices

By William Vaughan Jr.

Special to the Press Herald

CHEBEAGUE ISLAND — For several years, the issue of food stamps in Maine has been simmering. The arguments relate to a number of issues, including the length of time one can receive food stamps (currently 60 months); what can be purchased (practically any food); whether fraud is involved (there have been such cases); and whether a recipient should be tested for assets (a \$5,000 limit has been [proposed](#)).

The most recent scuffle, as [reported](#) by the Press Herald last week, involves whether soda and candy should be available for purchase with food stamps. According to the Nov. 23 article, Maine spent more than \$115 million in medical claims related to obesity in the Medicaid program here, and 88 percent of those receiving health insurance through Medicaid also receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (also known as “food stamps”). In other words, those purchasing food with SNAP benefits may not be obtaining the most healthy food available.

One concern appears to be whether a ban on soda and candy would harm small food stores. According to a U.S. Census [report](#), 18 percent of Maine residents receive SNAP benefits, making the state third in the nation, after Oregon and Mississippi. Gov. LePage’s decision to make fighting welfare in the state a central tenet of his administration would appear to be based on a real problem.

One way to think about the issue derives from the lyrics to the Rolling Stones song titled “You Can’t Always Get What You Want.” The song repeats that statement and continues with: “But if you try sometimes you just might find/ You get what you need.”

The distinction between wants and needs is fairly intuitive. We both want and need food, for example. Some of us want sex, but as research on the longevity of nuns [demonstrates](#), we don’t need it. We need vitamin C, but in its absence do not spontaneously want sources of vitamin C, such as citrus fruit (as 18th-century Scottish surgeon James Lind’s need to search for a cure for scurvy shows: see <http://tinyurl.com/jowuo7t>.)

When it comes to food stamps, this distinction could be put to good use. One basic problem with food stamps derives from the fact that food is both a want and a need, but the program should be designed to provide for a need alone. The want intrudes, and results in people who may not really need food stamps opting for them. If there were a way to satisfy the need, but not the want, the problem would be at least attenuated.

It turns out there is a substance that satisfies the need for nutrition but skimps on the want. The product is called [Soylent](#). It was [devised by entrepreneur Rob Rhinehart](#), who determined what the body requires and simply ordered the necessary chemicals off the Internet.

According to the Soylent website, “Soylent’s nutritional makeup includes protein, carbohydrates, fats, fiber, and vitamins and minerals such as potassium, iron and calcium. It includes all of the elements of a healthy diet, without excess amounts of sugars, saturated fats, or cholesterol.”

Living on Soylent, Rhinehart saw his food costs drop from \$470 a month to \$50. However, at the moment, one cannot purchase Soylent with food stamps.

The taste of Soylent appears to leave something to be desired. One reviewer, a New York Times dining reporter, [stated](#): “These instant meals are meant for work warriors for whom good and delicious food is secondary to perfect and unassailable engineering.” For present purposes this is a plus: Soylent satisfies a need but not a want.

If Soylent were the only food available to those in need of dietary supplements, the percentage of Mainers seeking SNAP benefits might well decline (addressing the high rate of SNAP recipients in the state), while the health of those continuing to receive them might well improve (addressing the Medicaid costs of those recipients).

On a more general note, finding a way to satisfy the needs but not the wants of those in trouble would appear to be a necessary ingredient of any welfare program that addresses those, and only those, truly in need. Given this logic, allowing the purchase of soda and candy (which satisfy wants but not needs) goes in exactly the wrong direction.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Vaughan Jr. of Chebeague Island is a behavioral psychologist.

Good Intentions and \$100 Million Fail Again

The Wall Street Journal

October 13, 2015

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/good-intentions-and-100-million-fail-again-1444678446>

For at least the last 50 years we have seen expensive and repeated efforts by governments and private sources to reform government-run schools.

Regarding James Piereson and Naomi Schaefer Riley's "[Zuckerberg's \\$100 Million Lesson](#)" (op-ed, Oct. 6): Of course, the philanthropists are exceptional at what they do and, of course, they are well-intentioned. Unfortunately, they don't understand education, the government-school monopoly, the government-school special interests or what an education expert is. For at least the last 50 years we have seen expensive and repeated efforts by governments and private sources to reform government-run schools. The result has been successive waves of more expensively schooled and less-educated students.

Bruce N. Shortt

Houston

Revealing article, but the authors miss an important fact about Chicago's school system spending hundreds of millions of the Annenberg Foundation's money. Bill Ayers selected Barack Obama to "administrate" a program intended to improve Chicago's schools. After a few years the foundation refused to continue funding, citing an impartial study that showed "no improvement."

Thomas Subler

Versailles, Ohio

Compare both the writing and the requirements in, for example, the pre- and post-World War II Boy Scout merit-badge books for a very clear demonstration of the decline of American education. Before the war there were no constantly changing approaches to learning. It was understood that the basics were essential and required personal discipline and even (gasp!) memorization. With a solid foundation of the basics, young minds acquired the tools required to make something of themselves. The rest, it was understood, was a function of individual character.

This country would do well to return to a rigorous grounding in the basics, so that all our children could read with the level of comprehension we once took for granted and understand what was written in those old merit-badge books.

Julia Lutch

Davis, Calif.

The authors report that the \$100 million from Mark Zuckerberg may have had little effect on Newark public schools. For example, \$31 million went to teachers and administrators for back pay, before the union would even negotiate.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Note: Here is the letter as I sent it. The *Journal's* version rather distorts my intention.

Summarizing Dale Russakoff's *The Prize*, James Piereson and Naomi Schaefer Riley report that \$100 million from Mark Zuckerberg may have had little effect on Newark public schools ("[Zuckerberg's \\$100 Million Lesson](#)," Oct. 5). For example, \$31 million went to teachers and administrators for back pay, before they would even negotiate.

Piereson and Riley argue that philanthropists need to circumvent the interest groups they want to change. However, let me suggest one other way such change might come about.

Suppose that Zuckerberg had given \$100 thousand to, say, 10 different school systems, and told each that if improvement occurred within a reasonable time period there would be additional money offered. Any system that did show improvement would then receive some further funds, with the same stipulation. Eventually there might well be general improvement. And certainly there would be no chance for special interests to grab a chunk of the money, since so little would be at stake, and doing so would preclude further funds.

If such an approach worked it would show that it's not so much the amount of money that's important, but more the manner in which it is proffered.

Melting glaciers put abortions in perspective

Portland Press Herald

October 6, 2015

<http://www.pressherald.com/2015/10/06/letter-to-the-editor-greater-calamities-exist-than-pingrees-voting-record/>

James Waterhouse of Dayton has done us the favor of informing us that U.S. Rep. Chellie Pingree voted against the Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act ([“Letter to the editor: Note Pingree’s, others’ voting records on act to protect abortion survivors.”](#) Sept. 29).

Given our inability to control carbon emissions, curb population growth or settle our differences without force, I believe that Harvey Versteeg of Augusta was on the mark ([“Letter to the editor: Melting of glaciers to cause massive migration, wars.”](#) Sept. 27) when he wrote:

“This outmigration from the Middle East is nothing compared to what is coming. If we can’t handle this, what will we do when the Himalayan glaciers all melt by 2050 and the great rivers watering southern Asia become seasonal?”

Sophocles may have expressed the sentiment best: “To never have been born may be the greatest boon of all.”

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

[It should be pointed out that the paper apparently misinterpreted this letter, as the link suggests. The comment about Waterhouse is tongue-in-cheek, and actually commends Pingree for preventing births.]

Stigma for using dangerous drugs is useful

Portland Press Herald

August 13, 2015

Your report [“With overdoses on the increase in Maine, a role for the public awaits”](#) (Aug. 11) perpetuates the usual story line regarding addiction.

We learn that Laurie Bachelder viewed a man in Deering Oaks with a needle in his neck. Bachelder said, “It hit me like a ton of bricks that this stuff is everywhere. ... So I had to do something.”

But just because “this stuff is everywhere” does not mean that everyone is compelled to use it.

According to Darren Ripley, of the Maine Alliance for Addiction Recovery, “People are getting that it could happen here, it could happen to me, or it could happen to my best friend’s son. Addiction is not picky.”

Ripley also says it is sad that a stigma attaches to addicts, painting them as hopeless junkies.

Actually, addiction is picky. It picks on those willing to experiment with dangerous drugs, perhaps thinking they can control it. Conversely, most of us go through life with no desire to engage in such dangerous activities.

Contrary to Darren Ripley’s advice, quite possibly the best medicine would consist, at least in part, in continuing to attach a stigma to the use of dangerous drugs. We still attach a stigma to drunken driving (one more example of drug abuse), and woe to us if we stop doing that.

The statistics you report on are not in spite of the policies mentioned. They are a result of those policies.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Recapturing Our Ideals

The New York Times

JULY 25, 2015

To the Editor:

Children born in America today may expect to live to the year 2100. What kind of life will our children and grandchildren experience?

Will it be the American dream of our ideals: “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”; “equal justice under law”; democracy; equal opportunity and respect; good education and training; a satisfying job and income; security; health and shelter in a sustainable environment with safe food, water and air?

Past civilizations and great powers have risen, declined and occasionally risen again. Examples include Egypt, China, Greece, Rome, Persia, Spain, Britain and the Soviet Union.

Basic causes of past declines include environmental degradation and resource depletion; climate change, floods, droughts, famines; disease; political polarization, social conflict and civil war; military overextension and resource-draining wars; excessive debt; and subjugation by external powers.

Americans need to counter the basic causes of decline that exist here now, as well as other indicators of decline, such as workers’ shrinking share of wealth, decaying infrastructure, inflating influence of money in politics, and plunging proficiency of our political institutions in benefiting the general welfare.

Abroad we need to reverse the declining effectiveness of our efforts to realize and sustain American security, economic and political goals, while avoiding wars, especially a catastrophic nuclear war.

So what shall we do to regain and maintain the American dream for our children and grandchildren, to counter the decline of America and to avoid the disaster of war? Americans must address these questions now, *before* the next election. Candidates and citizens should *specify* and critically evaluate what they would do. After new policies are implemented, we need to continually re-evaluate them. The stakes are high — how our children and grandchildren will live, and the continuation of the American dream.

JEFFREY S. MILSTEIN

Burke, Va.

The writer served as a policy and strategic planner in the State and Defense Departments and was an assistant professor of political science and international relations at Yale.

Readers React

Throughout our history there have been those who predicted an American decline. During the Cold War the alarm came from the conservative right, in despair over what it saw as political betrayal, moral corruption and military weakness. There is a new wave of despair over America’s future, now coming from various points along the ideological spectrum.

I don’t know if America is in decline or not, and I doubt that anyone else does either. The Greek historian Polybius wrote that “no sensible person could be justified in taking present circumstances as a basis for

future expectations.”

The book of the future is a closed one. We strive to do the best that we can for our country and our grandchildren, defending (and expanding) the values and principles that Mr. Milstein outlines. But there is a limit to what people, however engaged and forward thinking, can do to control or determine the future. A great national decline has many causes, not all of them obvious amid the political clamor and rush of events.

The outcome is unknowable to us, but if history teaches anything, it is that nothing lasts forever.

STEVEN BERKOWITZ

New York

The dream will no longer be about thriving in America, but across borders in businesses, schools and organizations that shape their own place in the world. The idea of relying on the nation or its government to provide the pathway, the protection, the support for a self-realizing life is fading.

But this is not a turn to self-reliance. To realize your dreams now, and especially in the digital, interactive future, requires a network of personal and institutional connections that are crossing the conventional ones of family, neighborhood, state and nation. The possibilities of making these connections are growing exponentially. Our children and grandchildren will live in a much more dynamic world. New forms of interaction require new controls on violence, along with controlling the impact of too many people on the resources of the earth. Wishing them good luck.

DOUG CHALMERS

New York

The writer is professor emeritus of political science at Columbia University.

First and foremost, we need to invest in our children, particularly their education and health. Raise money (taxes, philanthropy, company sponsorship) to support public schools, health clinics that serve the young, Head Start, and activities that encourage children to develop outside of school hours. Offer vocational opportunities for higher education that can become a viable alternative to college degrees.

Create more opportunities for women, people of color and L.G.B.T. individuals in all walks of business life. No longer externalize the costs of pollution from companies. Make them pay the bills for cleanup. Put people to work with conservation and repair work on our infrastructure and national parks. Implement single-payer health care nationwide. For everyone. Overhaul the for-profit drug and hospital industries. Overhaul and support the Veterans Affairs system for our vets.

Create action groups in each state to address issues from global warming. Create bigger financial incentives for energy-saving cars, fridges and other products. Support the architectural Not So Big House movement for both residential and commercial developments. Overturn Citizens United.

I realize much of the above is pie-in-the-sky. But you did ask.

TRACY KLINESTEKER

Kalamazoo, Mich.

Mr. Milstein asks what the future in this country will look like, laying out two possibilities. He cites some of the basic causes of decline, such as environmental degradation, climate change, political polarization, resource-draining wars and excessive debt. He states, “Americans must address these questions now, *before* the next election.” Our current debates are largely off the mark. They include abortion, same-sex marriage, immigration and whether Senator John McCain is a war hero. It may well be that we must address the questions brought up by Mr. Milstein now, but we are not, and are not likely to do so. We are trapped in minutiae and are largely ignoring the broader issues. And future generations will pay dearly.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN Jr.

Chebeague Island, Me.

Ironically, for children the American dream is more realized in other advanced democracies, where they pay for elections with public funds instead of private big money donors. Lawmakers are freed up to respond to the needs of all economic classes, giving children a better chance for security and mobility.

Strict gun safety laws, not dictated by gun maker lobbyists, increase kids’ chances of living out their life spans. Child care benefits enable both moms and dads to work and raise stable families. Health care is guaranteed for all, without excessive profits to insurance and medical businesses. Higher education is subsidized, so graduates are free from huge college debt. Youths can get job apprenticeships in high schools, gaining skills to earn a living. Unions are accepted.

All these components of a healthy, secure life are fiercely contested in the United States, with the highest child poverty rate among advanced nations. America’s conservative ideology of market solutions and small government cuts the rug out from under families. This continues to bode ill for future child health, education and well-being.

MEREDITH BALK

New York

Yes, “American decline” is the big question facing 2016 candidates (and all citizens). Is the “American dream” dead? Is our sense of “exceptionalism” unrealistic? Do we need to learn to live within limits? Americans have always believed we are special, that we have an “open frontier” of opportunities (Frederick Jackson Turner) and enjoy the “free security” of two oceans (C. Vann Woodward), creating a national spirit of optimism, security and hope for the future. Is this still alive? Or do we accept that all civilizations fall, that we need to limit our international commitments, focus on our domestic problems, make democracy work and learn to live together better?

International statistics document that the United States is no longer No. 1 in most areas (health, prosperity, happiness), and national polls reveal our lack of confidence about the future. The challenge for politicians is to face these realities, look beyond political games and provide concrete plans (not rhetoric) about a new and better path to the future.

WALT GLAZER

Sagamore Hills, Ohio

The writer is a retired historian who taught at the University of Pittsburgh.

The Writer Responds

How do we achieve a better life for our children and grandchildren? We can learn from the experiences of past civilizations and powers that declined. We can also learn about the likely effects of specific policies such as those proposed by Ms. Klinesteker from the contemporary experiences of people in other advanced countries, as cited by Ms. Balk. These social policies that work are reflected in the international comparative statistics cited by Mr. Glazer.

Professor Chalmers accurately describes the growing importance of global interactions through the networks of communication, transportation and trade that shape our lives. We need to widen our circle of concern to include not just Americans, but people throughout the world. However, some transnational actors are undeniably hostile toward us and our values, including Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, hackers and some nation-states. Thus, our own national government must continue to provide protection and support for us.

So why, as Mr. Vaughan notes, are most of the current proposals by candidates largely not addressing the important issues that affect our future? American politicians have become overly solicitous to special interests, on whose financial support they depend to run their election campaigns. Meeting their demands regarding taxes, subsidies and regulations often comes at the expense of meeting the needs of a majority of voters, who give elected officials their Constitutional legitimacy.

So what should we do? If America declines, we *all* do, including special interests that will lose out to foreign competitors. The American people must understand that their future and their children's future is at stake in elections, and register and vote for the candidates who will support their interests.

JEFFREY S. MILSTEIN

Burke, Va.

As a swift admonishment, spanking has its place

The Boston Globe

July 15, 2015

Unlike Eve Minkoff ("[SJC errs in letting spanking of children stand.](#)" Letters, July 7), I believe that the Massachusetts [Supreme Judicial Court ruled correctly](#) in allowing parents to use reasonable force in disciplining their children.

According to Jetta Bernier, of the Massachusetts Citizens for Children, the court ruling "implies that physical punishment can, in fact, support the welfare of children. I would object to that altogether. [Spanking] doesn't communicate to children what they did wrong and what they should do instead."

On the contrary, if a young child runs into the street, a swift spank is probably the best way to curtail that behavior, communicating what the child did wrong (run into the street) and what the child should do instead (not run into the street).

I certainly agree that this behavior can shade into abuse, but that does not imply that it is abusive to begin with.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Ban on powdered alcohol ends learning opportunity

Portland Press Herald

June 5, 2015

I was sorry to read that Maine may ban powdered alcohol (“[Maine Senate gives initial OK to banning powdered alcohol](#),” June 1). The reason, apparently, is that lawmakers “worry the powder will make it easier for teens to sneak alcohol into parties and sporting events.”

There are two groups affected by such legislation: those old enough to purchase alcohol legally, and those not as old. For each group there would be some freedom given up, but for the former group, nothing is gained in return.

And I have to wonder whether younger people would really benefit by such a move. If a young person does not drink, it could mean he or she has gained sufficient self-control, or that the opportunity to drink has not presented itself. By removing that opportunity, legislators would simultaneously remove any chance for young people to learn to control their impulses.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

B.F. Skinner Beef
Harvard Magazine
May-June 2015

I assume, judging from what appears the ages of the would-be B.F. Skinner acolytes featured in your March-April issue ("[Computing in the Classroom](#)," page 48), that none have had any direct personal contact with the man. I, unfortunately, did, having taken his Gen Ed course.

There was only one assigned reading: Skinner's own *Walden Two*.

Its high point was its solution for stuff like cleaning the sewers: having the kids do it since they loved playing in the dirt—a direct steal, if I remember correctly, from Fourier.

Skinner was a terrible lecturer. The grad assistant even drew up an "extinction curve" for the class—how the pigeons stopped playing ping-pong (students coming to class) because of lack of reinforcement.

I remember speaking with a psychology major friend before the final exam, complaining that I did not know what we could possibly be questioned about. He asked whether there was not any other reading beyond *Walden Two*. I said Skinner had listed as "suggested reading" a textbook in behavioral psychology by two disciples. My friend replied that he had intended us to read that book, but did not make it "required" because that would be an "aversive stimulus" (vide the neo-Skinnerian Cass Sunstein, the subject of your glorification in the previous issue). I borrowed his copy, read it the night before the exam, and received a note from Skinner congratulating me on having the highest score in the class. The reason was simple—I am sure that I was the only person who had even looked at what nearly the entire exam had been based on.

This story says something about Harvard not only then but now that the powers-that-be prefer not to be closely looked at.

John Braeman '54
Champaign, Ill.

I was sorry to read Sophia Nguyen's mischaracterization of B.F. Skinner and behaviorism in her "[Computing in the Classroom](#)." She begins by writing: "He [Skinner] had trained rats to push levers and pigeons to play Ping-Pong." This is equivalent to characterizing Darwin as saying that people came from apes. (True, but hardly central.)

The reality is that Skinner developed both the free-operant procedure and many schedules of reinforcement, and discovered that schedules had characteristic effects on behavior. Prior to his work the usual approach involved mazes, which impose one schedule (what would later be called a fixed-ratio) and require that the experimenter pick up the rat at the end of each trial and put it back at the beginning of the maze.

With the free-operant procedure the animal is placed in a compartment and can respond at any time. During the session electromechanical equipment (and later computers) control the stimuli and consequences the animal is exposed to. The experimenter is needed only at the end of the session.

In 1957 Charles Ferster and Skinner published their Schedules of Reinforcement, in which behavior under numerous schedules was reported. There are basic schedules (the fixed ratio mentioned above, and others), and various ways of presenting them (including multiple schedules, in which two or more basic schedules alternate, and concurrent schedules, in which two or more basic schedules are simultaneously available). Over the years numerous quantitative results on such schedules have been reported.

Skinner is routinely dismissed as a reductionist (as Nguyen does). But if you believe that what people do is because of the consequences of their behavior (a position taken by economists and political scientists), Skinner's work simply cannot be dismissed or disregarded.

William Vaughan Jr., Ph.D. '76
Chebeague Island, Me.

Allowing sale of human organs would benefit buyer, seller

Portland Press Herald

April 17, 2015

It's not an exploitative transaction, but a voluntary one that would alleviate disease and give a poor donor the chance to make some money.

By William Vaughan Jr.

Your editorial [“Our View: Innovation required to ease organ shortage”](#) (April 10) points out that many people need organs that could be given by living donors.

One impediment for potential living donors is the fact that federal law prevents the sale of organs. As you write: “While nobody supports dismantling safeguards against allowing rich patients to exploit the poor for their organs, we must also acknowledge that the current system has disadvantages for both low-income donors and low-income recipients.”

Change “nobody supports” to “few support,” and the statement is accurate. But it makes sense to discuss an alternative.

Safeguards are already in place. For example, the United Network for Organ Sharing website [says](#): “In order to qualify as a living donor, an individual must be physically fit, in good general health, and free from high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, kidney disease and heart disease. Individuals considered for living donation are usually between 18-60 years of age.”

Suppose a rich person purchases an organ from a poor person. This would usually be a kidney, although it could be one lobe of a lung, or part of a liver, intestine or pancreas. Both people benefit: The rich person loses money but gains an organ or part of an organ, and the poor person gains money but loses an organ or part of an organ.

In both cases, the transaction is voluntary. We may safely assume that that loss to the poor person does not impair his or her health.

Where is the exploitation?

About the author

William Vaughan Jr. is a resident of Chebeague Island.

Columnist's views off track on evolution and creation

Portland Press Herald

February 10, 2015

<http://www.pressherald.com/2015/02/10/letter-to-the-editor-columnists-views-off-track-on-evolution-and-creation/>

M.D. Harmon ([“On evolution, creation and the existence of a higher power.”](#) Feb. 6) discusses evolution in the context of Christian thought, and concludes that there is no conflict. For example, Pope Francis stated: “Evolution in nature is not inconsistent with the notion of creation, because evolution requires the creation of beings that evolve.” (“Creation” here means divine intervention.)

On the other hand, Harmon holds that Darwinists believe that “life appeared and evolved ... randomly.” In other words, the purely scientific perspective is, according to him, nonsensical.

Unfortunately, on both points Harmon is off track: that evolution requires the creation of beings that evolve, and that life appeared and evolved randomly.

Although today, evolution involves beings that evolve, many biologists assume that self-replicating molecules bridge the gap between inorganic matter and living organisms, an idea referred to as “abiogenesis.” Richard Dawkins discusses the concept in his book “The Selfish Gene.”

Contrary to Pope Francis, evolution does not require the creation of beings that evolve. Evolution does require randomness, referred to as variation in the genetic makeup of organisms over time. This, however, is just half the story.

Variation is coupled with selection, the idea that organisms that are better fit to their environment will tend to leave more offspring, which in turn inherit the genetic makeup of their parents. Randomness per se would result in organisms that were poorly adapted to their environments, since most (but, luckily, not all) random variations are deleterious.

I have to assume that these distortions of evolutionary thought creep into Harmon's writing because they support his views on religion. Unfortunately for him, a scientific approach neither requires nor leaves room for intervention, divine or otherwise.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Refusal of vaccination can endanger health of others

Portland Press Herald

January 11, 2015

Kelly Callahan of Appleton makes the argument that parents can refuse to have their children vaccinated ([“Letter to the editor: Parents have a right to refuse vaccines.”](#) Jan. 7).

As she says, “One’s individual freedom to make decisions for his or her children – be it schooling, religion or medical intervention – is a fundamental right.”

As often happens, this assertion of a right fails to acknowledge that rights are bound up with responsibilities. I may have a right to drive on the highway, but only if I do so in a responsible manner. Ms. Callahan only mentions that parents have the responsibility to educate themselves, but that leaves too much open to interpretation.

For example, consider the case of [Dale and Leilani Neumann](#), whose daughter died from untreated diabetes. The court decided they did not have the right to simply pray for the child.

In the case of vaccination, refusal to do so has implications not just for the child, but for other people as well. [A child with chickenpox can infect other people](#) by means of a cough or sneeze, and the disease can lead to skin infection, scars, pneumonia, and death. Ms. Callahan may believe she has the right to take an unvaccinated child to school or on an airplane, but any reasonable public policy should deny her that right.

After all, the rest of us have rights as well.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Funding must be found to maintain transportation infrastructure

Portland Press Herald

December 9, 2014

Ivan Most, a professional engineer, provides us with a picture of our deteriorating transportation infrastructure (“[Maine Voices: U.S. needs national initiative to upgrade roads and bridges](#),” Dec. 3).

As he points out, we have invested in building that infrastructure, but are failing to maintain it. One suggestion of his is that politicians with “intestinal fortitude” raise the gasoline tax. Another suggestion is to turn our roads over to the private sector, with tolls possibly covering their cost.

Unfortunately, with electric cars, hybrid cars and traditional vehicles, a gas tax falls unevenly on road users. There is also resistance to raising any tolls (see, for example, the Nov. 28 New York Times article “For New Tappan Zee, Questions Persist Over How High the Tolls Will Climb”).

The ideal solution would involve each user paying for that stretch of highway used, with bridge use incurring proportionally higher costs.

With our ability to monitor vehicle location, this is technically feasible (for aircraft, see the National Air Traffic Controllers Association’s Flight Explorer Snapshot), but privacy concerns will probably prevent its implementation.

Most writes: “Doing nothing is not an option.” Unfortunately, that is precisely the future into which we are moving. As a Bob Mankoff cartoon in The New Yorker puts it, “How about never – is never good for you?”

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

The social costs of illegal marijuana should be counted

Portland Press Herald

October 27, 2014

We pay far too much to punish people for making what should be a personal choice to risk their health.

Another View

By William Vaughan Jr.

M.D. Harmon makes the argument that we should consider the possible costs of marijuana before legalizing it ("[Before legalizing marijuana, Maine should consider the cost](#)," Oct. 10). He points out that people can become dependent on it, can develop psychotic symptoms, and may have impaired intellectual development.

However, it also makes sense to consider the current costs of marijuana (and other drugs) being illegal. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, about 50 percent of inmates in federal prisons are there for drug offenses. Over 25 percent of those inmates are there for marijuana-related offenses. Assuming a cost of \$30,000 per year to feed and house a prisoner, the 98,000 inmates there on drug-related offenses cost us about \$3 billion a year.

about the author

William Vaughan Jr. is a resident of Chebeague Island.

We should begin training young people in techniques of self-control

Portland Press Herald

October 24, 2014

A cautious liberalization of marijuana laws needs to be coupled with teaching self-control to students.
By William Vaughan Jr.

CHEBEAGUE ISLAND — With upcoming votes regarding the legalization of marijuana in South Portland and Lewiston, the arguments have been going back and forth regarding the wisdom of such a move.

Both Portland Press Herald columnist M.D. Harmon (“[Before legalizing marijuana, Maine should consider the cost](#),” Oct. 10) and Stephanie Anderson, district attorney for Cumberland County (“[Maine Voices: Untruths about marijuana point to serious implications of legalizing it](#),” Oct. 21), have argued against such a move.

Arguments against legalization rest on an unstated premise: If some people abuse certain substances (such as some drugs), or they abuse certain freedoms (such as gambling), then those activities should be constrained for all, in order to help those people who encounter problems. Here I suggest an alternative approach that also addresses such problems, without limiting the freedom of the rest of the population.

Many people engage in various forms of self-destructive or maladaptive behavior, including compulsive gambling, overdrinking, smoking, lack of exercise, eating too much poor-quality food, getting into debt and spending too much time on the Internet.

There are two ways to deal with such problems from a social policy perspective: Either constrain or tax them, or teach people techniques to control their behavior and let those with problems experience the negative consequences.

Limiting the number of casinos, outlawing alcohol to those under 21 and Michael Bloomberg’s attempt to tax sugary drinks of 64 ounces are cases of the first approach. The second approach, for which I argue here, is less often heard. Nevertheless, it merits a hearing.

- First, notice that the attempt to constrain or tax certain activities often fails. The deaths of Philip Seymour Hoffman, Whitney Houston, Amy Winehouse, Michael Jackson and Heath Ledger, to name just a few cases, should serve notice that drugs are readily available to many people.
- Second, there can be negative side effects, among which I would include large sums of money going to drug cartels and the deaths of thousands of innocent bystanders, particularly in Mexico, as well as a flow of people to this country trying to escape such violence.
- Third, a drug offense can damage a person’s future prospects with regard to education, employment and housing. At the very least, the war on drugs should raise a few questions.

As an alternative, let me suggest an approach with few of the above problems.

Begin training young people in techniques of self-control. In order to see how this could work, consider a typical school day in elementary or high school. There are fixed starting times, class periods and lunch hours. Every student moves in lockstep from September to June, regardless of effort or aptitude.

The effect of such a regimented schedule is to wipe out most initiative and exploration on the part of students, turning them into “excellent sheep” (as former Yale professor William Deresiewicz puts it).

Curiously, a similar regimentation is at work in our prisons, where prisoners get up and do everything else on cue (see <http://tinyurl.com/mnghu86> for the case of North Carolina). With respect to prisons, it is little wonder that recidivism is so prevalent, because prisoners have so little chance to learn useful habits.

With respect to schooling, suppose that students needed to acquire certain skills and knowledge before their school year ended. Some who worked harder would get out earlier, leaving those needing extra help with less competition for teachers’ attention toward the end of the year.

Under such circumstances, I suggest, few students would spend days smoking marijuana or drinking beer, even if they could get away with it. (In order to see our current approach to underage drinking, see “Portland High School replaces graduation speaker over Facebook post,” May 31.) And those who did act irresponsibly would experience the negative consequences of doing so. But the failure of a few would not take away from the freedom of the rest.

With respect to the question of legalization of marijuana, then, I suggest a cautious liberalization of such laws, in conjunction with a new emphasis on teaching self-control to students. Giving students greater freedom to fail or succeed, based on their own behavior, would teach a valuable lesson that is currently being missed. Our war on drugs is a futile attempt to patch up our failure to teach this skill.

— Special to the Press Herald

about the author

William Vaughan Jr. of Chebeague Island is a behavioral psychologist.

There are times in government when autopilot steers good course

The Boston Globe

October 06, 2014

Globe columnist Tom Keane makes the argument that indexing the gasoline tax to inflation allows legislators to shirk their responsibility. With a nod to English philosopher John Locke, Keane writes, “By allowing taxes to step up inexorably, based merely on a formula, the Legislature has delegated away its authority, largely removing from public view and public check something that I think almost everyone would acknowledge is a core function of government — the power to tax” (“[Shut off the pumps](#),” Op-ed, Sept. 30).

Call this the argument against automation in government. But consider: Automatic traffic lights are less expensive and more reliable than having a police officer at every corner. Automatic sorting of mail gets it delivered more quickly than sorting by hand could ever do. The use of automated computers in crime detection allows resources to be placed where they are most needed.

If automation is done properly, it cuts down on government costs and increases reliability. As Locke wrote, “The public good is the rule and measure of all law-making.”

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Some expressions of sexual deviance merit intolerance

Portland Press Herald

July 26, 2014

In a recent editorial ([“Our View: All Maine schools should heed panel’s ruling on bullying,”](#) July 17), the Portland Press Herald made this argument: “It’s a school’s responsibility to pay attention to its own culture of tolerance, and if the climate becomes hostile, the school can be held liable for violating a student’s civil rights.”

The editorial went on to state: “Every school should be confronting a culture that treats any variation from the majority in perceived sexual orientation and gender expression to be alien and worthy of contempt.”

In other words, if a student deviates from the majority in any way with respect to sexual orientation or gender expression, he or she should be protected from any negative reactions on the part of others.

It is here that the Press Herald, and indeed, most commentators, go too far. I suggest that there are indeed certain expressions of sexual orientation or gender of which we have every right to be intolerant.

In the online Free Dictionary, I find this definition of “paraphilia”: “Sexual perversion or deviation. A condition in which the sexual instinct is expressed in ways that are socially prohibited or unacceptable or are biologically undesirable, such as the use of a nonhuman object for sexual arousal, sexual activity with another person that involves real or simulated suffering or humiliation, or sexual relations with a nonconsenting partner. Kinds of paraphilia include exhibitionism, pedophilia, transvestism, voyeurism, and zoophilia.”

Either the Press Herald believes that any of these forms of sexual expression should be protected, or it must specify why some should be protected, and others not. In the latter case, some set of boundaries needs to be specified, and their locations defended. Otherwise, we will eventually find ourselves forced to legally defend forms of behavior that no civilization should tolerate.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Unemployment, culture face impact from immigrants

Portland Press Herald

June 25, 2014

Cushman D. Anthony of Falmouth makes the argument that those who come here illegally should be treated “with fairness and dignity” (“[Letter to the editor: Obligation to immigrants began with our own ancestors](#),” June 19).

His argument rests on two facts: Each of us, or our families, originally came here as immigrants, and those here illegally “are escaping from violence and death threats in their home countries.”

There is, however, another side to the issue. Consider two arguments.

- First, there is an economic argument. Millennials are experiencing high unemployment rates. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for those 16 to 19 years of age was 19 percent in May.

On the assumption that treating those who come here illegally with fairness and dignity involves providing them with jobs, that can only drive up the unemployment rate of those already here.

- And second, there is a cultural argument. We have all had it drummed into us that diversity is a virtue, and that all cultures are equally valid and valuable, but we still have our own culture.

With roughly 600 million in Latin America, about twice the number of people in this country, it would not take many millions from south of the border to change the culture of this country.

As B.F. Skinner wrote in “Beyond Freedom and Dignity,” in response to a question about why one should work for their culture: “There is no good reason why you should be concerned, but if your culture has not convinced you that there is, so much the worse for your culture.”

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Taxes in proportion to home value don't make sense

Portland Press Herald

May 20, 2014

Retrieved from

http://www.pressherald.com/opinion/letters/Letter_to_the_editor_Taxes_in_proportion_to_home_value_don_t_make_sense.html on 29 May 2014

As you report (“[Saco might join few Maine towns that let elderly defer taxes, keep homes](#),” May 5), Saco is considering a program that would allow people 70 or older who have owned their home for at least 10 years to defer property taxes, until they sell or die.

Payment of property taxes is just one way we manage to make ourselves miserable. There is, in fact, no logical reason why one should be required to pay money in proportion to the value of one's home. Are we trying to make homeownership more difficult by making it more costly? That may make sense in the case of cigarettes, but why should it apply to owning or improving a home?

If each person paid for the services that he or she required, property taxes could be eliminated entirely. We already attempt to implement this principle with respect to road use, where payment in the form of gasoline tax or tolls is designed to cover the damage caused by using a road.

I look forward to the day when government is designed to minimize the misery of its citizens. However, that day is far off when one group can legally extract money from another. And the imposition of property taxes is just one of many ways such an extraction occurs.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Taxing property makes perfect sense

Portland Press Herald

May 23, 2014

Retrieved from

http://www.pressherald.com/opinion/letters/Letter_to_the_editor_Taxing_property_makes_perfect_sense.html on 29 May 2014

I must respond to the latest letter from William Vaughan Jr. (“Taxes in proportion to home value don’t make sense,” May 19).

Mr. Vaughan argues that people should pay only for the services they use rather than be taxed based on their property’s value. This makes sense only if you want to live in a world where it’s every person only for themselves, rather than a society where people help each other.

Does Mr. Vaughan believe every child deserves an education, because many parents could not afford to pay the full price for that service? Did Mr. Vaughan go to a public school where others helped pay his bills?

The point of progressive taxation is to distribute the costs of our society on the basis of one’s ability to pay. Therefore, owners of more valuable properties pay more. The alternative is to deny many citizens any services they are unable to afford, including education, health care and security. That would make no sense in a civilized society.

Stephen Walbridge

Freeport

Don't force law-abiding citizens to pick up tab for scofflaws' acts

Portland Press Herald

March 28, 2014

Instead of boosting the alcohol tax, bill troublemaking drinkers for the problems they cause.

Another View

By William Vaughan Jr.

Greg Kesich, editorial page editor for the Portland Press Herald, makes the argument that the tax on alcohol should be raised (["To be credible, Maine's war on drugs must also target alcohol,"](#) March 19). Such an increase would have two effects: Reduce drinking, particularly by heavy drinkers, and increase money for various services (such as police) that are required because of such drinking.

The ultimate aim of such a tax increase would require those causing problems to pay for those problems, so that the rest of us can go about our business without being burdened. However, there is one central problem with Mr. Kesich's suggestion, and a solution that can address it.

The problem involves letting our legislators decide what forms of behavior we should be able to freely engage in. Suppose that a majority decided we should not eat meat. By all means, increase the tax on meat. Or perhaps we should not sky dive. Increase its tax. The end result of such a process would likely be the imposition of standards of behavior on all facets of life, by means of the proliferation of numerous new taxes.

As an alternative, why not require that each person who causes problems pay for those specific problems? If the police are called, let the drunk who raised the ruckus be billed for the visit. If an inebriated person assaults another, let whoever caused the harm pay for righting that harm.

The benefit of this approach is that, while there is overlap between those who drink and those who cause harm, there are also those who drink and don't cause harm, and those who don't drink but do cause harm. Place the burden on those who cause harm, and leave the rest of us to our own devices.

about the author

William Vaughan Jr. is a resident of Chebeague Island.

Lessons From Google, in School and at Work

The New York Times

Feb. 25, 2014

Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/26/opinion/lessons-from-google-in-school-and-at-work.html> on 31 May 2014

To the Editor:

Re "[How to Get a Job at Google](#)" (column, Feb. 23):

Thomas L. Friedman, in writing about Google's focus on the attributes of its job candidates rather than on just their grade point averages, highlights what many of us in higher education know: Young people must possess certain critical abilities to be successful upon graduation as well as many years down the road.

Liberal arts colleges can and should do more to articulate and measure what is needed to thrive — both professionally and personally — on both timelines. As one effort, our college has recently created and put into place an assessment platform that builds on our nuanced evaluation process.

Faculty members evaluate every student in every course based on six critical abilities, including most of the attributes that Google seeks on its problem-solving teams: ability to think analytically, exchange ideas effectively, innovate, work independently, and accept and act on criticism.

Ultimately, we want this assessment to achieve exactly what Laszlo Bock of Google urges colleges to do: Deliver on what they promise.

KAREN R. LAWRENCE
President, Sarah Lawrence College
Bronxville, N.Y., Feb. 24, 2014

To the Editor:

As Thomas L. Friedman notes, the criteria used by Google in hiring do not closely correlate with traditional educational skills. For example, Google is not looking for I.Q., but for the ability to process on the fly.

As Laszlo Bock of Google argues, the world does not care about your degree but only about what you can do.

If Google has discovered fundamental problems with our educational system, as well as solutions, I can only hope it eventually has some influence on how students are taught. Surely such an insight carries with it a corresponding responsibility.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN Jr.
Chebeague Island, Me., Feb. 24, 2014

Port Clyde, Berwick crashes show that strict liability should apply in road fatalities

Portland Press Herald

February 14, 2014

Retrieved from

http://www.pressherald.com/opinion/letters/Letter_to_the_editor_Strict_liability_should_apply_in_road_fatalities.html on 31 May 2014

On Aug. 11, 2013, while getting ready for a trip to Monhegan Island from Port Clyde, Cheryl Torgerson drove her car into another car and a number of people, killing 9-year-old Dylan Gold and severely injuring Jonathan Coggeshall.

Knox County's district attorney, Geoffrey Rushlau, has declined to press charges, because it would be difficult to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Torgerson exhibited criminal negligence ("[DA: No evidence to prosecute driver in Port Clyde fatal crash](#)," Feb. 7).

This is not an isolated incident. On April 10, 2013, Cameron Clair crossed the center line in his vehicle, killing Amy Harris and injuring her two children ("[Teenager faces fine in Berwick teacher's death](#)," July 20, 2013).

The charge against Clair is civil violation, which could result in a fine of up to \$5,000 and a suspension of his license for up to four years.

What these cases illustrate is that each of us is susceptible to being killed by another driver, and, under various conditions, that driver can get off with a small penalty. In both of the above cases the real culprit is the requirement that the driver be shown to have "mens rea," or "guilty mind."

There is, however, another standard, called "strict liability." In that case, there is no need to show mens rea; all that is necessary is to show that the person in question caused the damage or loss.

It can be next to impossible to know what was going on in a driver's mind when he or she caused damage, but it is all too obvious that death and injury can result from such behavior. In order to reduce the frequency of such acts, I suggest that we move to a standard of strict liability.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Column right on insurance; it's truly generational theft

Portland Press Herald

November 19, 2013

Retrieved from

http://www.pressherald.com/opinion/Letters_to_the_editor_Can_t_deny_warming_now_let_s_lead_fight.html?pagenum=full on 31 May 2014

John Graham of Woolwich complains (“[More objectivity needed in discussion of insurance](#),” Nov. 4) that a column by M.D. Harmon (“[Government steals from the young to give to the elderly](#),” Oct. 25) mischaracterizes the purpose of insurance. According to Graham, insurance requires “the more fortunate paying for the misfortunes of other subscribers.”

However, Harmon was summarizing the position recently taken by Stanley Druckenmiller and others. Druckenmiller was addressing the need for entitlement reform in the face of increasing debt.

For example, Druckenmiller, Geoffrey Canada and Kevin Warsh write: “Young people now entering the workforce will actually lose 4.2% of their total lifetime wages because of their participation in Social Security. A typical third-grader will get back (in present value terms) only 75 cents for every dollar he contributes to Social Security over his lifetime. Meanwhile, many seniors with greater means nearing retirement age will pocket a handsome profit.” (“[Generational Theft Needs to Be Arrested](#),” The Wall Street Journal, Feb. 14).

And lest anyone believe that paying into Social Security gives them a right to at least some of that money, the 1960 Supreme Court ruling *Flemming v. Nestor* asserts that no one has a legally binding contractual right to the money they paid in.

So elders today are being supported by younger people who are required to pay into Social Security, but those younger people are unlikely to get back as much as they put in (as Druckenmiller argues), and are legally entitled to literally none of what they put in (as the Supreme Court has ruled).

If there is any better example of generational theft, I have yet to hear of it.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Social Security is decidedly not intergenerational theft

Portland Press Herald

December 24, 2013

A letter by William Vaughan Jr. (“Column right on insurance; it’s truly intergenerational theft,” Nov. 19) quoted Stanley Druckenmiller and others: “Many seniors with greater means nearing retirement age will pocket a handsome profit.”

And in Vaughan’s own words, “Elders today are being supported by younger people who are required to pay into Social Security.”

That, my friend, is ludicrous.

I am not supported by anyone. The check I receive from Social Security every month is drawn from the money that I paid into it for all of my working life, 53 years.

I have children who work and grandchildren who work. They all pay into Social Security. Are you trying to tell me that I am committing theft against them?

I am supremely disgusted with all of you who are pushing the propaganda that seniors and the elderly are leeches on the haunches of the young. The insinuation of generational theft is abhorrent.

Oh, and by the way, don’t get your tail in a twist when you see that I live in Cape Elizabeth. I am not a “senior with greater means.” I rent a small but cozy apartment.

Marlee Hill

Cape Elizabeth

Social Security prescription would mean rat race is never won

The Washington Post

November 15, 2013

Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/social-security-proposal-would-mean-rat-race-is-never-won/2013/11/15/d3771960-4c9b-11e3-bf60-c1ca136ae14a_story.html on 31 May 2014

Published: November 15

Martin Feldstein argued in favor of changes that would reduce the federal debt and allow for more job growth, particularly related to the nation's infrastructure [["The fiscal opportunity,"](#) op-ed, Nov. 12]. One of his suggestions involved gradually raising the age at which full Social Security benefits could be received. As he wrote, "In the 30 years since that [1983] compromise, life expectancy at age 67 has increased by three years. Gradually raising the retirement age for full benefits by three years would achieve substantial savings." However, a trap lurks in this suggestion.

As life expectancy increases, the amount of work required for full benefits would increase along with it, while the duration of retirement would remain constant. As Alice said to the Red Queen, "Well, in our country, you'd generally get to somewhere else — if you ran very fast for a long time, as we've been doing." And the Queen's reply? "A slow sort of country! Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

William Vaughan Jr., Chebeague Island, Maine

Prospective parents in Maine should be required to pass a test

Portland Press Herald

October 12, 2013

Retrieved from

http://www.pressherald.com/opinion/ANOTHER_VIEW_Prospective_parents_in_Maine_should_be_required_to_pass_a_test.html on 31 May 2014

They would have to demonstrate both parenting skills and financial security before being allowed to have children.

Another View

William Vaughan, Jr.

An editorial in the Portland Press Herald points out (“[Our View: Childhood poverty rate a disgrace for Maine](#),” Sept. 22) more than a quarter of children under 5 in Maine live in poverty.

The editorial never mentions that most of these children are born to families that should not be having children in the first place.

To drive legally, one must be of a certain age, pass a driving test, and purchase insurance. None of these standards applies to giving birth.

This past January there were 1,721 children in foster care, costing taxpayers \$36.2 million a year, or \$21,000 per child per year (“Drug issues propel rise in foster care in Maine,” Jan. 26).

This is a problem for poor children and taxpayers, but not their parents, since others are paying the cost of raising their children.

It only makes sense to set standards that should be met before giving birth.

I suggest three reasonable criteria: A person should show the ability to pay for food, clothing and shelter for a child, a knowledge of how to raise a child and a desire to care for a child.

Anyone meeting these standards is unlikely to require help from taxpayers, and the children of such people are unlikely to have the kinds of problems mentioned in the editorial.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Vaughan Jr. is a resident of Chebeague Island.

Reader asked to explain how he'd choose parents-to-be

Portland Press Herald

October 15, 2013

(Editor's Note: William Vaughan Jr.'s letter was mistakenly published twice, on Oct. 4 and 12.)

Amazing letter from William Vaughan Jr. of Chebeague Island ("Another View: To reduce childhood poverty, make would-be parents pass test," Oct. 12). Equally amazing is the fact that the Portland Press Herald published it twice!

In his letter, he is responding to your editorial of Sept. 22 concerning childhood poverty in Maine ("Our View: Childhood poverty rate a disgrace for Maine"). He gives statistics regarding children in foster care and then proposes a solution: He would set certain standards that couples would have to meet before giving birth.

Interesting concept. Perhaps Mr. Vaughan would compose a follow-up letter explaining just how he would accomplish this.

Elizabeth Kolodin

Pemaquid Harbor

Rise in unwed birth rate reflects significant shift

Portland Press Herald

October 17, 2013

In his Oct. 4 letter, William Vaughan Jr. asks, essentially, “Why not set criteria for having kids?” He suggests that standards be set and met before allowing childbirth, and notes the cost to the state for much of their care.

I doubt many would want the state to have that power. It’s not like passing a driver’s test, a comparison he makes.

But until recently, the morals and mores of a common culture provided the restraint. The Western culture said, “Don’t have children until you’re married.” To bring a child into the world was seen as a serious responsibility, on many levels. That was the standard in the Western world for many millennia. (The state did set the age of marriage.)

But that began to change in the ‘70s. Before then, the U.S. out-of-wedlock birth rate was always under 5 percent – and many of those babies were adopted by couples who couldn’t conceive. In the 1970s, that rate began to rise, and now it’s more than 40 percent. The culture has changed. The media now present the standard.

Mr. Vaughan cites the costs in dollars to the state to help support these children. Poverty and less education is a usual outcome. But the cost can be high in many areas.

He’s not alone in citing this growing trend and its serious consequences. The family is the laboratory for life. It is where values and behaviors are learned.

A recent book by Charles Murray, titled “Coming Apart,” suggests the new upper class is not based on income. It is based on having two parents who are educated.

I can’t agree with Mr. Vaughan on his solution, but I agree that attention should be paid. Over time, this trend has serious consequences.

Jane Merchant
Kennebunkport

Why not set criteria for having kids?

Portland Press Herald

October 4, 2013

As an editorial in the points out ([“Our View: Childhood poverty rate a disgrace for Maine,”](#) Sept. 22), more than a quarter of the children under age 5 in the state live in poverty. As the editorial states, “This is a problem not just for poor children and their parents, but also for our entire society.”

Although “too many of our children are suffering,” the editorial never mentions that most of these children are born to families that should not be having children in the first place.

To drive legally, one must be of a certain age (presumably reflecting maturity), one must pass a driving test (reflecting ability), and one must purchase insurance (so that others are not left holding the bill in the case of an accident).

None of these standards applies to giving birth to another human being, an act that can create problems just as driving can.

This past January there were 1,721 children in foster care, costing taxpayers \$36.2 million a year, or \$21,000 per child per year (“Drug issues propel rise in foster care in Maine,” Jan. 26).

This is a problem for poor children and taxpayers, but not for their parents, since others are paying the cost of raising their children.

It only makes sense to set standards that should be met before giving birth.

I suggest three reasonable criteria: A person should show the ability to pay for food, clothing and shelter for a child, they should show a knowledge of how to raise a child, and they should show a desire to care for a child.

Anyone meeting these standards is unlikely to require help from taxpayers, and the children of such people are unlikely to have the kinds of problems mentioned in the editorial.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Why warn drivers about speed cameras?

The Washington Post

September 1, 2013

Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-warn-drivers-about-speed-cameras/2013/09/01/c7862c14-11a8-11e3-a2b3-5e107edf9897_story.html on 31 May 2014

Published: September 1

Rande Joiner of Potomac [[letters](#), Aug. 28] argued that fairness dictates that drivers be told about the presence of speed cameras by a prominent sign, allowing them to slow down.

I find the suggestion bizarre. If a person slows down only for speed cameras, and speeds the rest of the time with impunity, is there any real gain in terms of safety?

William Vaughan Jr., Chebeague Island, Maine

Income tax on state visitors overlooks their contributions

Portland Press Herald

August 19, 2013

Letter-writer Robert Smart of Millinocket makes the argument that people who come to their homes in Maine in the summer should “pay their fair share,” perhaps by taxing their income on a prorated basis (“[With all the rich summer folks, why is state so poor?](#)“ Aug. 10).

While, as he says, they use our roads and bridges, they also pay our gasoline tax. And while they do not use our schools, they do pay property tax, which largely goes to education.

A person’s income is, in fact, of little value in calculating what that person costs others in terms of the services they obtained from the state. Rather than basing what the state collects from taxpayers on their income, I suggest we base it on what they collect from the state.

Of course, given our penchant for redistribution, some will ask how this approach would provide for those who need more than they have, given that others have more than they need.

And opening that seemingly benign Pandora’s box puts us right back in the situation we currently find ourselves in, trying to extract as much money from anyone able to pay, regardless of what they cost the rest of us.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Prenatal Genetics and Dilemmas and Pluses

The Wall Street Journal

June 23, 2013, 12:41 p.m. ET

Marcy Darnovsky and Alexandra Minna Stern report on current approaches to prenatal testing for genetic abnormalities, such as that which gives rise to Down syndrome (“[The Bleak New World of Prenatal Genetics](#),” June 13).

Because of the lack of genetic counselors, Ms. Darnovsky and Ms. Stern write, “Many parents will wind up taking their cues from the glossy brochures of the NIPT companies, with their language about ‘risk’ and ‘abnormalities’ and their images of perfect babies with no visible disabilities. Meaningful and responsible genetic counseling is supposed to be nondirective, marketing is intended to persuade.”

But of course this very piece is far from nondirective, and is intended to persuade. Why, after all, put terms like “risk” and “abnormalities” in quotes? The intention, quite obviously, is to denigrate anyone who would like to reduce these events.

The authors go on to discuss the development of whole-genome tests: “What will parents do, for example, if they discover that their 10-week-old fetus has a five times higher-than-average chance of being diagnosed with breast cancer later in life, or a 34% higher-than-average risk of developing Alzheimer’s 70 years from now?”

They call this “an even more unsettling prospect.” I call it progress.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

A version of this article appeared June 24, 2013, on page A18 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Prenatal Genetics and Dilemmas and Pluses.

Bad nutrition is not just a matter of money, but also behavior

Portland Press Herald

May 18, 2013

Food is both a need and a want, and people need support for making the right choices.

By WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.

A recent editorial in the Portland Press Herald ([“Our View: Hunger crisis calls for immediate attention,”](#) May 6) makes the argument that since Maine ranks seventh in the nation for food insecurity, more should be done to provide people with the food they need.

It is argued that General Assistance should not be cut, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program should be funded and commodity crops should not be subsidized (since doing so raises the cost of more nutritious fruits and vegetables).

The editorial concludes: “If we choose to, we can end needless suffering.”

There is, however, one area that the editorial overlooks.

While, as pointed out, food is a need, it is also a want. While the satisfaction of a need helps maintain health, the satisfaction of a want helps maintain the behavior that gave rise to that satisfaction (in terms of B.F. Skinner’s analysis, satisfying a want is called “reinforcement”).

There are numerous forms of behavior that give rise to hunger (and that would be reinforced by satisfying that want), but most of them are undesirable, including low educational achievement, having more children than can be supported and poor work habits.

It may well be that “we can end needless suffering,” but doing so requires that we not simply reinforce maladaptive behavior, since doing so perpetuates needless suffering. For example, food could be made contingent on some kind of self-improvement, however slight (such as consistently getting to work on time).

A program along such lines would be more difficult to implement than one that simply hands out food, but it has the virtue of not tending to prolong the very problem it seeks to solve.

William Vaughan Jr. is a resident of Chebeague Island

Cousins' position on ferry helps preserve Chebeague

Portland Press Herald

April 6, 2013

Regarding your report on the conflict between Chebeague Island and Cousins Island ("[Ferry that joins also separates islanders](#)," March 18) over the "influx of traffic, noise, trash and commotion brought to Cousins Island by hundreds of residents bound for Chebeague Island":

According to my colleague David Hill, who managed Chebeague Transportation Co. for a number of years, "It's a fight for survival of the (Chebeague) island." He added that the traffic on Cousins is "no different than any other place where cars pass by houses."

I may be in the minority, or even a minority of one, but I'd suggest that the constraints on people coming to Chebeague are a blessing in disguise.

Cousins Island, with a bridge to the mainland, is largely a suburb of Portland. I rather doubt residents leave their doors unlocked or keys in their cars, as we can still do on Chebeague. And why do many parents hover over their children awaiting the school bus?

On Chebeague, all of this will change for the worse, of course. There are owners of open spaces and woodlots who want to sell, businesses that want more customers and construction workers who would like to build more homes. But, to the extent that Cousins Island impedes the flow of people, cars, trucks and buses that pass by their houses, that change will occur more slowly.

Cousins Island, then, can help preserve the survival of Chebeague Island as we now know it. It is, unfortunately, not very likely that Chebeague will do this on its own.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Does ‘right to bear arms’ apply to major armaments?

Portland Press Herald

February 23, 2013

I have to agree with letter writer John Parker of Falmouth, who wonders why the National Rifle Association is against any limits on the size of gun magazines (“[Scrutinize U.S. gun owners as closely as we do drivers](#),” Feb. 12).

Anyone who consistently advocates that the Second Amendment gives us all a right “to keep and bear arms” would do well to address a few issues:

Do you believe the numerous national laws that govern hand-held machine guns should be eliminated? Should we all be allowed to own and use rocket-propelled grenades? And what about MANPADS, or man-portable air-defense systems, a kind of surface-to-air missile?

These are all arms that can be borne. If the Second Amendment is as sacrosanct as many gun advocates argue, those people ought to argue that every man, woman and child has the right to own and use these three kinds of armaments.

If, on the other hand, it only makes sense that there should be limits to the scope of the Second Amendment, whether or not large magazines (or assault rifles) ought to be legal is open to question.

I very much doubt that anyone who flies, including members of the NRA, would be comfortable knowing that MANPADS were easily available.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Sunday Dialogue: The Future of Medicare

The New York Times

February 23, 2013

Readers weigh in on problems with the health care program.

To the Editor:

The Medicare budget is now facing economic pressure that will force political leaders to make difficult choices to extend the solvency of the program. Medicare is already paying more in benefits than it receives in income.

As a result, the Medicare trustees in their most recent report issued a “Medicare funding warning” again, for the sixth straight year. Yet despite the looming crisis, before lawmakers start cutting benefits, raising premiums or increasing taxes, let’s fix Medicare first and make it worth saving.

Over the years, Medicare has become more complicated and confusing for the beneficiaries covered by this insurance plan. For example, it now includes four parts, A, B, C and D, each with different yearly deductibles, co-payments and monthly premiums.

In addition, beneficiaries are confronted with many other complex and expensive decisions, like whether to buy a Medicare supplement insurance policy as protection against skyrocketing deductibles and co-payments, or which of the many Part D prescription drug plans is the right choice for them. Regrettably, there are no Medicare field offices for a face-to-face interview to help customers make an informed decision. Instead, beneficiaries are directed to call 1-800-MEDICARE or to visit www.medicare.gov for help.

While lawmakers must address the ominous Medicare financing crisis, their first priority should be to fix Medicare and transform it into a user-friendly health insurance program with one monthly premium and reasonable co-payments for all services. After all, why ask taxpayers and Medicare beneficiaries to pay more money to support an obsolete health insurance program when a far better plan is within reach?

THOMAS M. CASSIDY

Stony Brook, N.Y., Feb. 18, 2013

The writer, an economist, is a clinical associate professor of social welfare at Stony Brook University and a former senior investigator for the New York State attorney general’s Medicaid Fraud Control Unit.

Readers React

Canada’s Medicare program — phased in at the same time as the American version — shows how we can make Medicare simpler and thriftier, while simultaneously upgrading its coverage. Canada’s program covers all Canadians (not just the elderly) under a single public program in each province, and bans co-payments and deductibles.

Patients can choose any doctor and hospital. Cutting out private insurers and the complexity and fragmentation they impose has simplified paperwork for patients, doctors and hospitals. Administrative costs are roughly half United States levels, saving more than \$1,000 per capita.

Over all, Medicare spending on the elderly has grown three times faster in the United States than in Canada since 1980, while life expectancy (for the elderly, as for all age groups) has grown faster in Canada. If American Medicare costs had risen at Canadian rates, we'd have saved more than \$2 trillion by now, and Medicare's trust fund would show a healthy surplus.

STEFFIE WOOLHANDLER
DAVID U. HIMMELSTEIN
New York, Feb. 20, 2013

The writers, internists and professors at the CUNY School of Public Health at Hunter College, co-founded Physicians for a National Health Program.

As a professional and a Medicare subscriber, I have found the program's customer service to be unfailingly efficient and polite. I could never say the same for private insurers. I agree with Mr. Cassidy that rather than cut Medicare, we can change it, but I believe that I might differ in how.

Our Congress can change Medicare if it is serious about real savings. How many billions would it save to cut all subsidies for Medicare Advantage plans; allow Medicare to negotiate drug prices for Medicare Part D with pharmaceutical companies; and take for-profit companies out of Part D entirely?

Medicare is seamless in paying my fees, and paying for care when I need it. The fees Medicare pays are very low, and cutting them further is not a good cost-cutting maneuver. It hurts small businesses like mine and that of my primary care physician; both of us have the same expenses we have always had.

Medicare could run its own show with no private subsidies to for-profit entities. We seniors would be better off.

VIRGINIA D. REIBER
Boston, Feb. 20, 2013

The writer is a clinical psychologist.

Mr. Cassidy's proposed fix is sensible but is far short of what is needed.

Medicare is headed for bankruptcy because it depends largely on open-ended fee-for-service payment of almost any services providers choose to deliver, at prices mainly determined by the providers. Compounding the problem, most providers act like independent businesses seeking to increase their income, regardless of whether they are for-profit or investor-owned.

An effective Medicare fix would require a new payment system that prospectively pays providers for comprehensive care at a rate set by a single public payer. It would also need a not-for-profit medical care system based on multispecialty doctor groups that pay physicians by salary, thus minimizing incentives to deliver duplicative or unnecessary care.

The new system would have to be mandatory for all citizens, including legislators, and it would have to be financed by a progressive, earmarked health care tax.

Obviously, such reform would be slow and difficult, but so would any other change that threatened vested interests. All reform will depend on an aroused public opinion.

ARNOLD S. RELMAN

Tucson, Feb. 21, 2013

The writer is professor emeritus of medicine and social medicine at Harvard Medical School and a former editor in chief of *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

Medicare suffers from an economic “tragedy of the commons.” Every stakeholder in the Medicare program has an incentive to overuse the system for his own benefit. In the end, when exploitation of Medicare exceeds its finite capacity, the resource is destroyed.

The Medicare patient has an incentive to accept expensive treatment because it seems to be free and is enthusiastically recommended by the physician. The physician has an incentive to offer high-cost services because she is paid well to do so. Compensate physicians on almost any basis other than piecework fee-for-service, and you remove the incentive to overtreat.

In the end, the appetite of Americans for Medicare treatment will always exceed the capacity of the Medicare system to provide it while controlling costs. By any other name, cost containment requires rationing (limitation) of services.

Rationing medical services is not itself immoral. Some methods of rationing are often inequitable. After all, we ration by a person’s ability to afford insurance. The most effective rationing is achieved when an unnecessary medical service is neither requested by the patient nor recommended by the physician. Properly structuring incentives makes this more likely.

THOMAS SHAPIRO

San Jose, Calif., Feb. 20, 2013

The writer is a retired surgeon.

Mr. Cassidy’s plea to simplify the rules for gaining access to Medicare benefits makes good sense, but doing so will not be enough to “fix Medicare.”

The greatest threat to Medicare’s continued ability to serve elderly and disabled Americans is its failure so far to contain its spending. Indeed, the failure to contain health care costs is a characteristic of the American health care system as a whole.

A multipronged approach can help reach the goals of more reliable quality of care and lower costs: paying providers to care for patients instead of to provide individual services; electronic medical records and other advances that can increase the probability that the services doctors recommend will really benefit patients; and new provider organizations — accountable care organizations — that take responsibility for the health of the patients who enroll with them.

This strategy can both improve the quality of services provided and bring health system costs under control. It will take time, and it won’t be easy.

Providers and patients alike will need to learn from unfolding experience. If successful, the payoff will be durable improvements not only to Medicare but to the American health care system as a whole.

STEPHEN M. DAVIDSON
Brookline, Mass., Feb. 21, 2013

The writer, a professor at the Boston University School of Management, is the author of the forthcoming book "A New Era in U.S. Health Care: Critical Next Steps Under the Affordable Care Act."

Mr. Cassidy discusses various problems facing Medicare, in particular its solvency and transparency. With respect to the first issue, it may be worth noting that any remnant of personal responsibility is completely lacking in the program.

There are numerous health problems that are a result of lifestyle choices, including emphysema (smoking) and obesity (lack of exercise and poor eating habits). But Medicare pays regardless of the cause.

If one burns down his own house, insurance payments are generally withheld. Withholding such payments for problems caused by irresponsible behavior would have two effects. There would be an immediate savings in Medicare costs, while in the long run people would be healthier, their poor choices no longer being subsidized.

Such an approach may appear draconian to some, but all the low-lying fruit has already been picked. Eventually, difficult choices have to be made.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN Jr.
Chebeague Island, Me., Feb. 20, 2013

The Writer Responds

As Drs. Woolhandler and Himmelstein say, there are lessons in efficiency and simplicity to be learned from Canada's single public health program, which provides coverage for all Canadians. But after the polarizing campaign that resulted in the passage of the Affordable Care Act, legislators in the United States have sent a clear message that the fragmentation in the health care system, like Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance, will remain in place for the foreseeable future.

As a result, Medicare cannot rely on a single-payer system to rescue it from dysfunction. Instead, Medicare can and must make meaningful changes for beneficiaries and providers alike. As I said before, Medicare should be simple to use, easy to understand and affordable for beneficiaries. But reform must also include cost containment to save Medicare for future generations.

Although the new types of payment systems recommended independently by Professor Davidson and Dr. Relman provide a far better approach for controlling skyrocketing costs than today's fee-for-service model, these types of fundamental reforms are uncertain and take time.

Medicare must immediately reduce its risk for exploitation, whether by outright fraud or billing for medically unnecessary services. Medicare processes more than four million claims each business day

from 1.5 million providers. Trying to identify all of the bogus claims submitted to Medicare is an insurmountable challenge.

Therefore, to protect the integrity of the program, Medicare must raise enrollment standards so that only first-rate professionals and businesses with established credentials can earn the privilege to participate in the program.

The time to act is now; time is not on our side.

THOMAS M. CASSIDY
Stony Brook, N.Y., Feb. 21, 2013

Argument for higher taxes amounts to endorsing theft

Portland Press Herald

December 24, 2012

Mort Mather of Wells argues that those with higher incomes should be subject to higher rates of income tax ("[Any reason not to hike taxes on the rich?](#)" Dec. 18).

Such an increase, he argues, would not be unfair since even with it they could surely get by.

I personally find the argument a little offensive. If some neighbor of mine had more money than he needed, and I had less than I needed, would I be justified in stealing it from him? Would I be justified in lobbying my representatives to pass laws that would transfer some of that money to me? Would such lobbying not be a form of theft (albeit a little more indirect)?

I have to wonder why we are discussing lowering ourselves to the level of Willy Sutton, who when asked why he robbed banks replied: "Because that's where the money is."

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Higher taxes for rich not 'theft'

Portland Press Herald

December 31, 2012

William Vaughan of Chebeague Island states that the argument for higher taxes on higher incomes amounts to endorsing theft ("Argument for higher taxes amounts to endorsing theft," Dec. 24).

I believe that Mr. Vaughan, possessor of a Ph.D., should have opened whatever dictionary he owns before commencing his writing. He uses "theft" and "stealing" interchangeably, which is fine, except for the fact that neither word has to do with the discussion of higher or lower taxes.

"Theft" definition: "To take or appropriate another's property without permission, dishonestly or unlawfully, in a secret or surreptitious manner." Does Mr. Vaughan actually believe that any form of graded taxation is tantamount to theft?

His letter then goes on to imply that if I were to lobby a representative to increase taxes, I could somehow therefore be guilty of "a form of theft" or even reduced to the level of Willie Sutton, the infamous bank robber of the past mid-century.

The only thing proved by Mr. Vaughan's letter is that a poorly defined, convoluted thought process leads eventually to specious conclusions.

Skip Clark

Kennebunk

Backer of end to tax cuts draws on outdated credo

Portland Press Herald

November 20, 2012

Patricia Pora, a Sister of Mercy, makes the argument that the credo of the most basic public programs should be to provide care for all who need it, regardless of ability to pay (Voice of the People, "[Draw on nation's resources to address nation's needs](#)," Nov. 10). To this end, she says that tax cuts for those earning more than \$250,000 a year should expire at the end of the year.

Sister Pora's position is, at bottom, a restatement of Karl Marx's 1875 slogan: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 is a testament to the lack of viability of that approach.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Personal responsibility another way to cut entitlement costs

Portland Press Herald

October 7, 2012

Retrieved from http://www.pressherald.com/opinion/personal-responsibility-another-way-to-cut-entitlement-costs_2012-10-07.html

If people weren't covered for health problems that they can control, behavior might change.

Another View

By WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.

A Maine Sunday Telegram editorial ("[Retirement out of reach for most older workers](#)," Sept. 30) points out that Social Security is moderately solvent, but that Medicare will require either increased taxes, reduced benefits, and/or a reduction in health care costs.

There is a fourth approach that is seldom mentioned: Reducing benefits for those who cause their own problems.

It has been estimated that four types of disease eat up most Medicare spending: heart disease, end-stage renal disease, cancer and what is called metabolic syndrome.

According to the Mayo Clinic, heart disease is often the result of "unhealthy diet, lack of exercise, being overweight and smoking." All four are preventable by means of changes in behavior.

The other three types of disease are more complicated with respect to causes, but there is often a behavioral component involved.

Reducing benefits for those who cause their own problems would have two effects. The immediate effect would be to reduce the cost of health care for all of us, because of reduced expenditures.

The long-term effect would be to reduce the incidence of preventable diseases, because the lifestyles leading to those diseases would no longer be subsidized.

Personal responsibility seems to have gone out of style, but requiring responsible behavior as a condition of receiving health care would serve to help bring it back.

William Vaughan Jr. is a resident of Chebeague Island

Sunday Dialogue: The Benefits Trade-Off

The New York Times

September 8, 2012

Readers discuss how to preserve Medicare and Social Security.

To the Editor:

As a beneficiary of Social Security and Medicare for 16 years, I want our politicians to admit to two truths: Most of us recipients like both programs, but we know that some economies are in order to keep them sustainable as the large population of baby boomers becomes eligible. That means raising our monthly fees for these programs, limiting some benefits and raising taxes.

When politicians pander to our “lower taxes” preferences, they are failing to tell us the truth. I say: Let candidates be brave enough to propose details on the revision of these two programs and how to pay for them. Disagree as I must with much of Representative Paul D. Ryan’s proposals, at least we know what to disagree with. He challenges Democrats to give us details of a better proposal.

We Medicare and Social Security beneficiaries are aware that we have to make some sacrifices if these programs are to be preserved for our children and grandchildren. O.K., tell us what sacrifices. And what fair distribution of sacrifice between the middle class and the megawealthy?

When politicians fear losing our votes if they ask us for any sacrifice, they are failing us as leaders. We are beneficiaries of a past generation that sacrificed for us. It is time, candidates, to treat us as adults! Specify the difficult choices we need to join you in making.

DONALD W. SHRIVER

Chatham, N.Y., Sept. 3, 2012

The writer, an ethicist, is president emeritus of Union Theological Seminary.

Readers React

The spirit of Mr. Shriver’s suggestion is admirable, but his focus is both too broad and too narrow.

It is too broad because it lumps Social Security and Medicare together even though the problems facing them are not comparable. There are lots of alternatives that can keep the Social Security program healthy without imposing costs on people who can’t bear them: means-testing benefits; getting rid of the ceiling on earnings subject to the tax; applying the tax to all individual income, not just earnings from work; or (my favorite) getting rid of the regressive payroll tax altogether and financing Social Security with a progressive tax on consumption, like the proposed USA Tax.

Medicare presents a much more difficult problem, and here Mr. Shriver’s suggestion is too narrow. It’s not just that the program is unsustainable, although it is. The more fundamental problem is that it doesn’t make sense to have a separate program to provide care for older people like Mr. Shriver and me. We need a comprehensive national health care policy that addresses and balances the needs of the entire population.

A rational health care policy would place the highest priority on caring for the pregnant women, children and workers who are the future of our country, even at the cost of limiting care for the elderly to the preservation of productivity and quality of life and, when that’s no longer practical, palliative care.

Bottom line: senior citizens who have significant income from sources other than Social Security, as well as younger folks who are well off, need to make relatively minor sacrifices to keep Social Security going, and senior citizens should be prepared to make significant sacrifices in health care to free up medical resources for the young.

JOHN QUINN
Detroit, Sept. 5, 2012

Mr. Shriver says, "We Medicare and Social Security beneficiaries are aware that we have to make some sacrifices if these programs are to be preserved for our children and grandchildren."

We are?

Some of us old people think that it would be more humane for sacrifices to be made elsewhere. Let the rich sacrifice their tax breaks. Let the military sacrifice the part of its budget that supports wars when America has not been invaded. Let the space program sacrifice some of the money that goes toward exploring Mars. Let environmentalists sacrifice some of the money that goes toward preserving endangered piping plovers rather than endangered old people.

Wouldn't these be more humane measures than weakening the lifelines for the old and ill?

FELICIA NIMUE ACKERMAN
Providence, R.I., Sept. 5, 2012

It has been estimated that a person retiring now will receive roughly three times in Medicare benefits what he or she paid in Medicare taxes. One equitable solution to the problems posed by Mr. Shriver would involve a gradual move toward a 1-to-1 ratio of benefits to outlays (as is typically true of Social Security). Any larger ratio means that current retirees are literally stealing (albeit legally) from the next generation.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN Jr.
Chebeague Island, Me., Sept. 5, 2012

The willingness of people to make sacrifices, such as soldiers fighting a necessary war or first responders risking their lives in an emergency, is impressive. However, when the comfortable demand sacrifices from people who are already experiencing hardship, it is repugnant.

I know nothing of Mr. Shriver's personal situation, but I do know the data on the living standards of the elderly. The vast majority are not especially well off. For two thirds of people over age 65, their Social Security checks comprise more than half of their income. These checks average just over \$1,200 a month.

Medicare is a problem of a broken health care system. The problem is not that seniors are getting too much in the sense that they are getting better care than people do in other countries; the problem is that we are paying too much for the care. If our per-person costs were anywhere close to what they are in

countries with longer life expectancies than ours, we would be looking at huge budget surpluses, not deficits.

The sacrifices should come from the doctors and highly paid medical specialists, the drug companies and the hospital administrators. This is clear to anyone who looks at the data.

DEAN BAKER

Co-director, Center for Economic and Policy Research
Washington, Sept. 5, 2012

Currently, individuals earning more than \$110,100 do not pay Social Security taxes on income above that amount. Most poor and middle-class families pay 6.2 percent of their income in Social Security taxes; wealthy people making \$1 million end up paying less than 1 percent.

We can strengthen Social Security with one simple tweak: make everyone, including millionaires and billionaires, pay Social Security taxes on all their income. Then we can determine whether other sacrifices are necessary.

Social Security is one of the great achievements of American democracy. It keeps tens of millions of Americans out of abject poverty and provides a secure economic cornerstone for millions of hard-working people.

ROBBY STERN

Seattle, Sept. 5, 2012

The writer is president of Puget Sound Advocates for Retirement Action and chairman of Social Security Works — Washington.

Mr. Shriver urges President Obama and Mitt Romney to specify the sacrifices that they will propose to Medicare and Social Security beneficiaries if they are elected. Good luck with that.

Both campaigns are focused on the voting in the battleground states, particularly Ohio and Florida, which will likely decide the contest. Voters in those states will be inundated with advertising in TV and other media with the same lack of specificity of the speeches that we have seen at both the Republican and Democratic conventions. It is the Battle of Big Money and sound bites concentrated in small venues.

Until that changes, party platforms, fact checkers and mainstream media will have little impact, even if they can decipher and describe the different proposals to keep both Medicare and Social Security sustainable.

LESTER J. TANNER

New Rochelle, N. Y., Sept. 5, 2012

At the national level, there is almost no talk about shared sacrifice. What dominates is a debate over how much taxes the rich should pay to provide benefits for the non-rich. Where is the sharing in that?

There is a much better tone at the local level, where there really is discussion about how much we want to tax ourselves in property taxes in order to finance benefits for ourselves, such as the recently built family aquatics center in my town or the drainage improvement project currently blocking my street.

What we need at the national level is discussion of taxes on us for benefits for us, and not taxes on him for benefits for me.

JAMES G. RUSSELL
Bellaire, Tex., Sept. 5, 2012

The Writer Responds

There is much for me to agree with in these thoughtful letters: Mr. Quinn's call for taxing all of our income, along with a comprehensive health care policy; Mr. Baker's note that doctors and hospitals must do some sacrificing (I would add insurance companies); and Ms. Ackerman's insistence that the whole federal budget must be in view (I hope she shares my view that paying for \$3 trillion wars of choice should not take precedence over funding for national health care); and — best of all — the moral call of Mr. Russell that we distinguish between “taxes on us for benefits for us” versus “taxes on him for benefits for me.”

But Mr. Vaughan's call for a 1-to-1 pay-in-pay-out policy for both programs is troubling, especially for Medicare. That policy conflicts with the very idea of insurance — all pay equally before misfortune visits all unequally.

Like Mr. Quinn, I favor limiting “heroic” measures to keep me alive in the last three months of my life. A real national health care system would use my Medicare payments toward treatment of a 28-year-old who suffers from cancer. Taxation implies shared risk and shared citizenship.

“We're in this thing together,” the Democrats were saying this week in Charlotte. My problem with both conventions, however, is that there was little mention of the tens of millions of uninsured Americans, most of them poorer than I am, who stand to get medical coverage under the new Affordable Care Act. It's the prime ethical dimension of that law. Until we get past the “me and mine” mind-set, we won't be talking to one another about our common good.

DONALD W. SHRIVER
Chatham, N.Y., Sept. 6, 2012

Sunday Dialogue: Harm, No Foul

The New York Times

August 4, 2012

How some crimes of the elite are not prosecuted, and why.

The Letter

To the Editor:

Read the newspaper and you will see many instances of ordinary citizens going to jail when they break the law, while the elites face a mere slap on the wrist.

One shouldn't be fooled by the perp walks of rogue traders who hid billions in losses, perpetrators of Ponzi schemes or executives who committed insider trading for their own accounts. They are prosecuted because getting rid of the bad apples is in the interests of the firms involved and the securities industry in general.

But what has never been routinely prosecuted are the crimes in which corporations benefit because, after all, Big Business runs government instead of the other way around. For example, efforts to prosecute fraud in the 2008 economic debacle have focused on homeowners who made fraudulent loan applications, not the financial institutions that encouraged these loans.

These are among the others typically not prosecuted for their crimes:

¶ Stockbrokers who engage in unauthorized trading.

¶ Manufacturers that sell harmful products and then lie about their safety.

¶ Factory owners who ignore safety rules and thereby injure their workers.

Except in the most egregious cases or where the larger interests of the industry are involved, executives and professionals are usually charged only civilly, which means they pay a fine or lose some privilege (often just temporarily). For this purpose, an alphabet soup of regulatory agencies, whose real purpose is to protect the industries, exists.

Those in the professions — law, medicine, accounting and so on — have it even easier. Their transgressions are usually turned over to their own professional associations.

In other words, nowadays only the activities of chumps fall under the jurisdiction of the police. Everyone else has a “get out of jail free” card.

JONATHAN ZELL

Columbus, Ohio, July 30, 2012

The writer, a lawyer, is a former special assistant to the United States attorney for the Southern District of Ohio.

Readers React

Here's my guess: the vast majority of white-collar prosecutors and defense attorneys agree with Mr. Zell that there is a double standard of justice in this country: one for you and me, and another for the rich and powerful. So why don't more of them speak out, as Mr. Zell has?

Because they don't want to burn their bridges to the establishment.

The typical trajectory of the top law school graduates interested in a career in white-collar law is this: work as a federal prosecutor for a couple of years, then become a partner in a white-collar defense law firm and defend corporate criminals — at 5 to 10 times the pay.

The young prosecutor understands that serious criminal prosecution of major corporations and their executives will likely jeopardize his or her career at the big white-collar defense law firms.

That's one reason that instead of securing guilty pleas against major corporations, for example, they settle for deferred and nonprosecution agreements.

Mr. Zell spoke the truth. No way he's going to be working for one of the corporate defense firms any time soon.

RUSSELL MOKHIBER
Washington, Aug. 1, 2012

The writer is the editor of the Corporate Crime Reporter.

The long history of under-punishing white-collar (suite) crime and over-punishing conventional (street) crime does not have an easy solution. As Mr. Zell correctly suggests, the dominance of government policy and the co-opting of the regulatory agencies by high finance and big business render piecemeal legislative initiatives and token criminal prosecutions more symbolic than truly effective.

Only with a broad transformation of public consciousness to fully recognize the immense harm of high-level white-collar crime can we hope for the emergence of the political will necessary to transform the basic architecture of our political economy.

Only with a finance and corporate sector organized to focus laserlike on the interests of citizens, consumers and workers, as opposed to the obscene enrichment of the 1 percent, will we see truly effective prosecution and punishment of high-level white-collar crime.

DAVID O. FRIEDRICHS
Clarks Green, Pa., Aug. 2, 2012

The writer is a professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Scranton and the author of "Trusted Criminals: White Collar Crime in Contemporary Society."

Welcome to the 99 percent! It is a long tradition here that those of us who are not on top have no power. That is why you get the parking ticket for parking in a restricted zone ...where "they" can park.

What is amazing is that the electorate allows this state of affairs, some cheering on the very legal constructs that shut down the rights of their fellow citizens.

Congress is made up of many who claim that the “job creators” will build a worker utopia only if they are not harassed by regulations and taxation. And we vote for them!

ROBERT HIRST

Massapequa, N.Y., Aug. 1, 2012

Of all the urgent issues pressing America today, not one is more infuriating to me and everyone I know than our government’s abject refusal to prosecute the powerful bankers and other financiers for the catastrophe their greed has inflicted on the lives of millions of innocent citizens.

Mostly products of our “elite” institutions, rather than being punished for their crimes, they walk away with millions of undeserved dollars and then add insult to injury by stashing large chunks in the Cayman Islands, Switzerland and other tax dodges.

Bill Clinton, Robert E. Rubin, Dick Arney and the other influentials who undid the Glass-Steagall Act should work to undo at least some of the damage they caused by applying their clout to restore the law’s protective separation between banking and playing the market.

Meanwhile, as the 1 percent sail blithely along, we see Congressional Republicans pressing to make drastic cuts in school lunches for our poorest children. What has happened to our great country’s sense of decency and fairness? Have we no shame?

ARLIE SCHARDT

Stonington, Me., Aug. 2, 2012

The writer was Al Gore’s national press secretary when he ran for president in 1988.

Too often, citizens mistake government as the main enemy. We see corporations built and run by those without governing powers, so we believe that they’re on our side, our swords and shields meant to fight off big government.

The truth is that big business is mostly incapable of making decisions based on good ethics. The fueling drive of business is profit, and we should never forget that.

Unfortunately, the corporations run the government, and our system does little to ensure that they make good decisions or are held accountable. They have the power to evade prosecution, as Mr. Zell points out. They also heavily steer government to benefit profit through lobbying and advertisements.

The founding fathers had no idea that big business was just as dangerous to democracy as an all-powerful government. If we don’t limit the influence of big business in government now, it’s likely that corporations will substitute oligarchy for democracy, if it hasn’t happened already.

MICHAEL PAUL CAROLIN

Tucson, Aug. 1, 2012

Mr. Zell makes the argument that members of corporations, as well as those in various professions, are given a pass when it comes to being prosecuted for crimes. There is another facet to the same argument.

If more money can buy the time and energy of better defense lawyers, and if better defense lawyers make it more likely that the defendant will be either acquitted or given a lesser sentence, then money, rather than the evidence, dictates the outcome.

Given this, it only makes sense that Lady Justice not be depicted with a blindfold (which, after all, represents objectivity).

WILLIAM VAUGHAN Jr.
Chebeague Island, Me., Aug. 1, 2012

The Writer Responds

As Mr. Mokhiber writes, lawyers know all too well the double standard that exists in the law. But precisely because their vantage point allows them to know the inner workings of the law, lawyers are sworn to secrecy. In this way, the public is kept in the dark.

Every now and then, a speck of light shines in. For example, lawyers have been disbarred for stating that a judicial decision was result-oriented rather than based on the law. According to a New York Times/CBS News Poll taken last month, the American public has figured out on its own that this is why the Supreme Court upheld President Obama's health law.

So in answer to Mr. Hirst, the reason the 99 percent do not rise up against the law is that most of what goes on is hidden. From a former Treasury Department official's recent Op-Ed article ("Mitt Romney's Financial Mysteries," July 31), even I was shocked to learn that the government, by failing adequately to audit gift tax returns, has allowed the very wealthy to transfer unlimited amounts of money to their children without paying the required taxes. Who knew?

As Mr. Carolin said, the public doesn't even know who the enemy is. The people see the government showering the country's resources upon favored individuals to aid private enterprises and build up private fortunes, and so they "mistake government as the main enemy." But as he and I pointed out, Big Business runs the government.

To find the solution Mr. Friedrichs and Mr. Schardt seek, we must force the government to treat everyone equally.

Instead of giving the government discretionary power to do whatever it wants, it should be forced to prosecute all crimes for which probable cause exists, to establish standardized plea-bargaining rules, to bid all government contracts, to subsidize no private company or all of them, and to replace the often mutually exclusive legal precedents in the common law with unambiguous statutory law.

Some may say that taking away the government's discretionary power is like taking away a sailor's curse words. To which I would respond: Silence is golden.

JONATHAN ZELL
Columbus, Ohio, Aug. 2, 2012

Tie student achievement to educators' salaries

Portland Press Herald

July 2, 2012

Ron Bancroft asks why we have poor educational achievement in Maine, in spite of various programs designed to address the problem ([“Reasons for lack of progress in educational performance hard to pinpoint,”](#) June 14).

One example he points to is the fact that in 2011, just 32 percent of fourth-graders were reading at grade level or above. However, we can safely assume that the educators and administrators responsible for this dismal result were paid 100 percent of their normal salaries.

Therein, I suggest, lies at least part of the problem.

Require that those two numbers, whatever they may be, equal each other, and we'd see scores (and salaries) quickly rising toward 100 percent.

Leave things as they are, and we can safely expect to see these poor results persisting into the distant future.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Who is responsible when people eat too much?

The Washington Post

June 11, 2012

Susan Levin, director of nutrition education for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, did us all a favor in pointing out that eliminating large sodas is hardly sufficient to address our obesity epidemic [[letters](#), June 8]. She includes, among the usual suspects, cheeseburgers, hot dogs and potato chips. The list, of course, is virtually endless, as would be the government force necessary to ensure that each of us avoids all of these pitfalls.

Lost in this discussion is the recognition that if each of us were held responsible for our own health, there would no need for government intrusion. If we must pay for our neighbors' poor decisions on eating, then of course we have to monitor and control them as much as possible. And this is the road that New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg is directing us down.

William Vaughan Jr., Chebeague Island, Maine

Susan Levin made me wonder if soon the only foods we will be allowed to eat will be leafy greens and bean sprouts. Will the speed cameras and red-light cameras be joined by the fast food/jumbo soda cameras? Maybe a hefty fine for a hefty meal will become the norm. People won't get fat, but local city coffers will. Aargh. Enough is enough.

Sharon Klees, Hyattsville

Defense Department urged to reclaim former monicker

Portland Press Herald

April 21, 2012

I second Arthur Fink's suggestion that we cease talking about "defense spending," and replace such talk with the term "military spending" ("[Reader prefers word 'military' over 'defense.'](#)" April 11), but would go one step further: Change the name "U.S. Department of Defense" back to the original: the "U.S. Department of War."

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Legislator misconstrues nature of MaineCare issues

Portland Press Herald

March 3, 2012

Rep. Margaret R. Rotundo defends MaineCare, making the argument in a Feb. 23 [letter to the editor](#) that MaineCare is a “health care program not a welfare service.” This distinction is based on the fact that “payments go to hospitals and health care providers, not directly into the pockets of eligible individuals.”

Let me suggest a rather different typology. If a person receives something of value, that transaction may either involve that person also giving something of comparable value, or not.

The first case corresponds to an economic transaction. The second case corresponds to theft, either legal (welfare, broadly speaking) or illegal (as in bank robbery).

A person receiving Social Security or Medicare may have paid in to the system, but as soon as the benefits exceed what was paid in (including interest), what was an economic transaction becomes a case of welfare.

I am sure that many people on MaineCare need those services, but it only makes sense to acknowledge what kind of transaction is really taking place with that program.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Rep. Margaret Rotundo, D-Lewiston, argued in her [letter to the editor](#) that MaineCare, Maine’s Medicaid program, is a “health care program,” not a welfare service. She went on to cite figures about the growth of the program. She suggested that it was not quite as fast as Republicans have suggested.

Arguing about whether to call MaineCare “welfare” or a “public health care program” is just an argument of semantics that will not help us to improve the system. But since she brought it up, are food stamps not welfare either? Are they a “food program”?

As for the growth in MaineCare, Rep. Rotundo cites 10 percent growth in spending in the past six years.

However, total state and federal Medicaid spending in Maine has increased by 45 percent and enrollment has grown by 78 percent in just the past 10 years. Since 1998, the share of Maine’s state budget going to Medicaid has grown from 12.4 to 21 percent.

Notice that we are not arguing about whether MaineCare is growing, but by how much.

The bottom line is that we need to make MaineCare and other welfare programs sustainable.

The bipartisan, 2012 emergency budget plan that cuts the size of MaineCare, a plan that Rep. Rotundo helped craft and that passed in the Senate on Feb. 23, is a good step in that direction.

Hank Fenton
Portland

Don't blame the weather or the road conditions

Portland Press Herald

January 5, 2012

Drivers, not road conditions, cause crashes.

Your report "[Icy roads claim five Maine residents](#)" (Jan. 1) begins "Freezing rain and light snow are blamed for car-crash deaths in Bowdoin, Cornville, Edinburg and Gardiner."

It was not, however, icy roads that claimed five lives, nor are freezing rain and light snow to be blamed.

In all of these cases it was irresponsible driving, under adverse conditions, to be sure, that produced the so-called "accidents."

This reinterpretation may appear academic to some, but I suggest that the usual way of phrasing the issue (as the Portland Press Herald did) leads people to blame the weather, not themselves.

And that tactic will, in turn, produce more accidents.

Conversely, a person who takes responsibility for the consequences of his or her own behavior is less likely to end up in a ditch.

William Vaughan, Jr., Chebeague Island

Red Light, Green Light for Cameras

The Wall Street Journal
November 14, 2011

There is no inherent reason traffic cameras should be used in a purely punitive manner (“[Cities Blink on Traffic Cameras](#),” U.S. News, Nov. 7). While some portion of the fines should be used to maintain the cameras, the rest could go to those who don’t break the law, perhaps on a probabilistic basis. A person who stopped for a red light might receive a check for \$50 in the mail, for example.

This would have two effects: There would be less opposition to such cameras, and there would be more compliance because doing so might result in a reward. Under present conditions, compliance simply results in avoidance of a fine.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

What’s not to like about red-light cameras or speed cameras? It’s a win-win equation for the cities and their drivers. The cities need to establish control over those who drive, and most cities could certainly use the revenue. The drivers get a chance to drive foolishly, as many do anyway, and pay for those habits as they go.

Stephen Pollock
Rockville, Md.

Red-light traffic-camera fines in Sacramento, Calif., approach \$500. That includes recently added cameras for detecting a failure to completely stop before turning right against a red light, a violation that accounts for 0.037% of accidents according to a Department of Transportation report.

Surely cameras are mostly about revenue hiding behind the guise of safety.

Gary A. Incaudo
Sacramento, Calif.

Diversity doesn't always add value to the group

Portland Press Herald

November 6, 2011

Letter writer James A. Weathersby of Augusta makes an eloquent argument for the value of diversity ([“Changing hues of autumn reflect diversity’s benefits,”](#) Oct. 23). He states, for example: “Our strength lies in our variety.”

Diversity per se, however, is not of value. Among a group of honest and hard-working students, the addition of a lazy cheat increases diversity, but decreases the value of the group. Among a group of healthy people, one with disease increases diversity, but decreases value. A group that embodies any virtue you can think of can have its diversity increased by the addition of an individual lacking that virtue.

There is a long history of thought regarding virtue, going back at least to Plato’s Protagoras, where he discusses bravery, justice, temperance, holiness and wisdom. It is unlikely that diversity will join this pantheon of virtues.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

War on drugs has costs that can outweigh its benefits

Portland Press Herald

October 19, 2011

What once was a matter for criminal law now is a threat to national security at the highest level.

William Vaughan Jr.

Maine Voices

CHEBEAGUE ISLAND — A recent Portland Press Herald article on the drug popularly called “bath salts” (“[Southern Maine braces for bath salts](#),” Oct. 9) discusses the negative impact this substance can have on users, and the fact that Maine has banned the sale and possession of this substance.

This is the usual pattern when it comes to substances that are both reinforcing and harmful: Make their sale and possession illegal.

While this approach may appear to be the only rational one, there are unintended consequences that should be considered.

When deciding on public policy, it only makes sense to consider all the consequences, both positive and negative, and thereby make an informed decision. And in the case of the war on drugs, that is not happening.

The logic of this fight involves protecting people from themselves. Taking drugs, whether legal or illegal, involves making a decision for oneself. There appear to be genes that predispose certain people toward being rewarded for specific drugs.

For example, a mutation of a certain gene makes nicotine more reinforcing for those with that mutation. Similarly, certain genes make the subjective effects of marijuana more reinforcing.

Since no one can choose his or her genes, the war on drugs may be viewed as a way to help protect people with these susceptibilities from themselves.

However, protecting people from themselves can incur costs. Were those costs to exceed the benefits of that protection, the basis for the war on drugs would be brought into question. There is evidence today that the costs of the war on drugs could become prohibitive.

Mexican drug cartels are responsible for most of the cocaine, heroin and marijuana that comes to the United States, and are beginning to control methamphetamine.

Since President Felipe Calderon of Mexico took office in 2006, more than 40,000 people have died in Mexico as a result of drug-related violence. Calderon wants to make the war on drugs a permanent fixture of the Mexican government, in spite of the fact it does not seem to be working. He claims Mexico will be safer, “and to have not acted, it would have deteriorated much more.”

Michael Morrissey, the Norfolk, Mass., district attorney, wrote in a [letter to the editor](#): “The opiate epidemic rages on. We should be alarmed that the problem is now so severe that the public health focus has shifted from drug prevention to death prevention.”

The only reasonable conclusion is that the war on drugs is not working and, in spite of Calderon’s promises, is unlikely to work in the future.

But the large amounts of money flowing south of the border for drugs have other effects. In Colombia, drug cartels build “semi-submarines” that travel just beneath the surface of the ocean.

According to [U.S. Coast Guard Rear Adm. Joseph Nimmich](#), director of the Joint Interagency Task Force South, “These vessels are intelligently designed. They are not very comfortable, but they are now very seaworthy. They are capable of carrying multi-ton cargos. They can travel thousands of miles without refuel or resupply. And they are very hard to detect.”

He has also pointed out: “If you can carry 10 tons of cocaine, you can carry 10 tons of anything.”

With that last statement in mind, consider the ongoing attempts by Iran to create nuclear weapons. There is evidence that Iran is enriching uranium to 20 percent purity, which is close to what is needed for fuel for an atomic weapon.

Recently, Iran apparently attempted to engage with Los Zetas, a Mexican drug cartel, to kill the ambassador from Saudi Arabia to the United States and to carry out other attacks.

Iran may have plans to deploy warships near our coast. But if the same result could be achieved by using semi-submarines to carry atomic weapons, it is only logical to assume Iran is thinking along those lines.

The war on drugs, then, results in the flow of large amounts of money to Mexico and Colombia, which allows drug cartels to develop sophisticated means of delivering drugs to this country. Those same means could be used to deliver atomic weapons to our coastal cities.

Joseph Ruddy, an assistant U.S. attorney in Tampa who prosecutes narco-mariners, has [pointed out](#): “You don’t want to see one of these trekking up the Hudson River.”

The only way to attack this problem is to legalize all drugs, thereby stemming that flow of money to drug cartels. Failure to do so may well result in the deaths of millions and the destruction of some of our major cities.

There would obviously be costs involved in legalizing drugs, but there is a much larger potential cost for not doing so.

- Special to The Press Herald

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Vaughan Jr. is a resident of Chebeague Island.

Atlanta Cheating Scandal

The New York Times

September 9, 2011

To the Editor:

You report on charges of cheating in the Atlanta schools (“[A Scandal of Cheating, and a Fall From Grace](#),” news article, Sept. 8), and point out that Beverly L. Hall, the superintendent until recently, faces accusations that she should have known of the problem.

But there is a structural problem in public education that makes cheating on standardized tests nearly inevitable: Students are evaluated by the same people who are teaching them. To put it bluntly, educators are in the position of evaluating themselves, by means of grading student performance.

The solution, quite obviously, would involve an independent agency grading student performance. I would have to guess that such an approach would demonstrate that our educational system is in a greater shambles than is usually appreciated, with the result that any such approach would be stoutly denigrated.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN Jr.

Chebeague Island, Me., Sept. 8, 2011

Some deserve entitlements, but plenty of others don't

Portland Press Herald

August 25, 2011

I am really tired of hearing that my "entitlements" must be cut to balance the budget. I am 59 years old and have worked since I was 16. I have paid into Social Security and Medicare since I started.

These programs are not gifts to me. I paid. My husband and I worked hard to gain access into the "middle class" only to have it pulled out from under us when jobs were lost.

We paid higher taxes for years. Now we are being told that my government wants to cut my programs. How about the entitlements we give to our elected officials and their dependents? Pensions and health care for life even if they only serve a term or two in office.

Let's clean up the real fraud and get some good-paying jobs for the younger people coming out of the colleges who will support all this other stuff. I know it is not popular so it won't get done.

I have the phone number for debt counseling if any of our congressional leaders, Republicans and Democrats, want it. They just have to default on their loans and someone will give money to them like they did us when our jobs went overseas. I personally am willing to give it all back to the banks and get in line for the entitlements.

Thanks a lot.

C. D. Collins

Lebanon

Our congressmen and congresswomen have completed their session -- a do-nothing session of which they should all be ashamed.

I am so tired of hearing that they are "concerned" about the budget, and the consensus appears to be that the solution, as they see it, is to cut Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. It always seems to come down to cutting services to the poor and elderly.

It is so much easier to attack those who have little clout.

The irony is that, as programs or services are cut, those who were the recipients will then have to turn to other sources for assistance, and we will still find ourselves in the same economic rut. As the old saying goes, you can't get blood out of a turnip. We keep hearing that we should not tax those wealthy people, because after all, they use their wealth to create jobs. Where are these jobs?

They were all sent overseas so that the rich could line their pockets even further.

We, the people, need to become more proactive, and demand of those we elected to office to recognize what is needed to keep our country economically stable. The United States has lost its AAA bond rating with one agency due to the failure of our senators and representatives to agree on a sensible plan for the economy.

It is time we stopped pampering the rich and powerful and demand that they pay their fair share.

Christine Kimball

Gorham

Lee Hammond, national president of AARP, argues against cutting Social Security or Medicare (“[AARP not apes, says upset leader](#),” Aug. 22). He states: “Seniors have spent their lives working and paying into the system so they’ll have secure health coverage and a foundation of income when they retire.”

That statement, unfortunately, is rather misleading. Eligibility for Medicare requires that a person work just 10 years at a job that pays into Medicare.

So, while some may have spent their lives working and paying into the system, others have contributed very little.

Andrew Biggs of the American Enterprise Institute [calculates](#) that the average beneficiary who retired in 2009 would have paid in to Medicare less than half what he gets out.

It would be accurate to call the remainder that such a person receives theft -- albeit legalized theft.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Any acceptance of crime is a 'disastrous fatalism'

The Boston Globe

August 21, 2011

SIMON WAXMAN ("[Poverty's boiling point](#)," Op-ed, Aug. 16) argues that the rioting in Britain is due to poverty. As he states it: "The bottom isn't in flames because it lacks morals. It is crying out because of persistent poverty."

Five years ago Janet Daley, writing in the Daily Telegraph, [made this observation](#): "Of course, we must deal, as a society, with the problems that can lead people into crime; but that does not have to entail being excessively, irresponsibly lenient with those who have been led. What follows from this is a disastrous fatalism: We must resign ourselves to the fact that we will never be able to reduce crime until we have solved the social problems of deprivation and poverty."

Waxman provides us with an excellent example of the disastrous fatalism Daley wrote about.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

There is a rational alternative to the income-tax system

Portland Press Herald

July 25, 2011

If people paid government according to the amount they used its services, their taxes would be under their own control.

by William Vaughan, Jr.

Maine Voices

CHEBEAGUE ISLAND - Two syndicated columns recently appeared in this paper regarding the income tax.

Peter Rush ("[Pro: Let's return to tax system that allows businesses to grow](#)," July 10) argued that we need a flat tax on all earnings in order to simplify the tax code (making it more comprehensible), eliminate special deductions for connected individuals and industries, and reduce the cost of preparing tax returns.

And William F. Shughart II ("[Con: Simpler taxation won't restore global competitiveness](#)," July 10) argues that while a flat tax has advantages, the real problem in Washington is spending, and a flat tax would not address that problem. Apart from calling for reduced spending, Mr. Shughart does not make any concrete suggestions.

Let me suggest that user fees, properly implemented, could and should eliminate income taxes. Let me first point out some of the shortcomings of income taxes, and then discuss some of the advantages of user fees.

To begin with, there is no rational basis for income taxes. The best defense is that purported to have been offered by Willie Sutton, when asked why he robbed banks: "Because that's where the money is."

We could (and in fact do) make similar arguments with respect to real estate and automobiles: The higher the value of such holdings, the more you owe to your neighbors. But just because a person earns a certain amount of money, or owns property worth a certain amount, does not mean that some percentage of that income or wealth belongs to the rest of us.

Apart from there being no rational basis for income tax (or property tax), such taxes are counterproductive, with progressive taxation being more so than a flat tax. Obviously many of us work because of the financial rewards resulting from such work. Reduce those rewards, and the tendency to work will be similarly reduced.

And the third problem with income tax, whether flat or progressive, is that it does not rein in spending. Just as a majority of citizens of a town can raise the mill rate on property taxes in order to spend what they want, so our government can change the tax rate in order to allow politicians to do what they think will likely get them re-elected.

What is required in order to control spending is a structure within which politicians are constrained by the rules of the game.

An approach that addresses all of these problems, as well as some others, would involve each person paying for what he or she obtained from the government, no more and no less.

At a local level, each of us benefits from the protection of police and firefighters. Divide the total cost of those services by the number of people in a community, and that would constitute one major cost of living there.

Each of us benefits from the protection of the U.S. military. Divide the total cost by the number of people living in the United States, and that would constitute one major cost of living here.

In the above examples, there is a built-in mechanism for restraining spending. For example, if citizens felt they were spending more on the military than was reasonable, there would be a vigorous movement to reduce those costs, as some are now saying.

In other cases, the costs are not fixed, but depend on choices made by each individual. Consider automobile ownership. At present, each car requires payment of an excise tax, which depends both on the value of the car and its age, independent of how much that car is driven.

Similarly, insurance costs are largely independent of how much a car is driven. But the costs to the community depend only on miles driven. As an alternative to our current approach, one could charge an automobile owner excise tax and insurance only on those days a car was driven.

This would automatically make each of us think long and hard about our driving decisions. People would walk or bicycle more for errands and would choose to live in close proximity to their places of work.

There would be, I predict, a reduction in both obesity and in oil imports, and hence a reduction in both health care costs and the cost of oil.

Naturally, a change of this magnitude would annoy many beneficiaries of our current system, but it may be the only way to get governmental spending under control. It would also give each individual more control over what he or she handed over to the government. The benefits far outweigh the costs.

- Special to the Press Herald

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Vaughan Jr. is a resident of Chebeague Island.

Life, liberty and a dignified death

Portland Press Herald

July 14, 2011

I sympathize with Norman Morse, who would like to end his life because of declining health but is prevented from receiving a physician's assistance because of the law in Maine ("[Choosing when to go](#)," July 10).

Laws against physician-assisted suicide are just one example of government intrusion into our private lives. Other examples include drug use (I can legally drink alcohol, but cannot legally smoke marijuana), whom and how many others one can marry (same-sex marriage has been derided by M.D. Harmon as counterfeit, and practically no one defends polygamy) and prostitution.

We may talk about "the land of the free and the home of the brave," but in reality there are too many nosy parkers in our midst.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

I agree with Norman Morse's decision and right to leave this life for the next one on his own terms. I also agree with his interpretation of what "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" implies, as cited in our nation's Declaration of Independence. Having enjoyed all three, he, at 91 years of age, should be able to enjoy a peaceful, painless death as an American entitlement.

I also wholeheartedly concur with Mr. Morse that an entire industry -- not just physicians -- is making "a lot of money keeping seriously ill and elderly people alive." For instance, since the age of 49 (I'm now 65), I have been inundated with sales pitches of all types from entities such as AARP, prescription drug plans, medical plans and services, senior and assisted-living facilities, etc. The list of these forced-life franchises goes on and on. Besides reminding me of my own advancing years, I view the whole thing as damned intrusive in general.

What happened to the right to die in one's own bed with your boots on?

I hope that, as my stay here nears its end, I will have the courage to refuse ridiculous life-prolonging medical treatment and to die with some dignity. I don't know if I would be as courageous as Mr. Morse, however, but I am thankful that he is bringing this subject to the forefront.

Beverly Fox Martin
Harpwell

I am a doctor in Oregon, where physician-assisted suicide is legal. This letter is in response to Kelley Bouchard's article, "[Choosing when to go](#)."

In my practice, I have discussed assisted suicide with more than a dozen patients. One of the first was a man in a wheelchair with a progressive form of multiple sclerosis. He told me that if it got too much worse, he might want to "just end it." I answered that he seemed to be asking for assistance with his suicide. He nodded affirmatively.

I told him that I could understand his fear and his frustration, and even his belief that assisted suicide might be a good path for him. At the same time, I told him that should he become sicker or weaker, I would work to give him the best care and support available. I told him that no matter how debilitated he

might become, that, at least to me, his life was, and would always be, inherently valuable. As such, I would not recommend, nor could I participate in his assisted suicide. "Thank you," he said.

When a person says "I want to die," it may simply mean "I feel useless." When a person says "I don't want to be a burden," it may really be a question: "Am I a burden?" When someone says "I might as well be dead," they may really be saying "No one cares about me."

In essence, we are not islands. How we respond can either reflect the inherent worth of the person requesting suicide or cause the person even deeper desperation. Patients can even feel pressured to proceed.

As such, in Oregon, legal assisted suicide has undermined trust in the motives of both physicians and family. Under our law, there is no assurance that the deaths are voluntary. Don't make our mistake.

Dr. William L. Toffler
Portland, Ore.

At age 73 and having a wish to be able to have a say in my end of life, I read with interest your article on Norman Morse. After 11 years, is it time to bring the end-of-life question back to the ballot?

Giving people the choice at the end of their lives is not something to fear. Look at Oregon's record -- there have been only a small number of assisted suicides performed. I would like to have that option.

The opposition of health agencies is expected. They make a lot of money keeping us alive.

Arline O'Reilly
South Portland

The article about Norman Morse in the Maine Sunday Telegram highlights the concern of many individuals as they age.

While I agree with Mr. Morse's assertion that "It's none of the government's business to interfere with medically assisted suicide," your writers should check facts before going to print.

While Mr. Morse may feel that he is entitled to certain rights, the statement concerning "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" appears in the Declaration of Independence, not the Constitution, and is not a right granted therein.

Does anyone edit this paper?

Anthony Rerrick
South Portland

The New Dietary Icon

The New York Times

June 6, 2011

To the Editor:

Your editorial about the new dietary icon (“[What Do You See on Your Plate Today?](#),” June 4) tells us, “The new icon captures what you see when you look down to eat (assuming you’re not eating from a takeout carton, which would be far worse), and it turns that view into a simple, comprehensible reminder of what should be there.”

This is a good example of government intrusion by stealth. What “should” be there depends on your goals. And not everyone has the same goals. Someone wanting to lose weight should be eating differently from someone trying to put it on.

Someone eating for enjoyment should be eating differently from someone unconcerned with enjoying his or her food. And anyone who is approaching death should eat whatever he or she wants.

One size does not fit all, and diversity in tastes should be given its due.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN Jr.

Chebeague Island, Me., June 4, 2011

Health care costs are sending country to the poorhouse

Portland Press Herald

May 14, 2011

A Maine Voices column makes an invalid argument about health insurance rates.

By WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.

Another View

The Maine Voices column by Randy Schwartz and Dennis DeSilvey ("[Proposed health legislation puts Maine's most vulnerable people at risk](#)," May 10) asserts that it would be discriminatory if people with life-threatening chronic diseases could not afford adequate health coverage.

The column further implies that it would be discriminatory if insurers could charge those with pre-existing conditions more than healthy people are charged. Although this kind of argument is often made, it does not make it valid, which may be appreciated by considering the opposite view.

If people with life-threatening chronic diseases can afford adequate health coverage, it means that other people are subsidizing them. Life-threatening chronic diseases, by their nature, are expensive to treat. Those other people who are subsidizing them do not choose to do so.

Rather, they are being forced into this position by laws that raise their health care costs above what they would be otherwise.

Similarly, if people with pre-existing conditions are charged the same as healthy people, it means that healthy people are subsidizing them. Those with pre-existing conditions are more likely to require expensive health care than those without those conditions.

When health care costs rise, we all pay in numerous unseen ways, including the cost of purchasing a new car and the cost of educating our young.

Last year we spent \$125 billion on cancer care alone, and by 2020 may spend \$207 billion on it. With the healthy paying the costs of the sick (and so contributing to those rising costs), the entire country is heading for the poorhouse

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Vaughan Jr. is a resident of Chebeague Island.

State plan leaves too much wiggle room

The Boston Globe

April 20, 2011

THE GLOBE'S editorial on proposals by Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester to tie teacher evaluations to student performance ("[Ed commissioner's plan for teacher evaluations gets it right](#)," April 19) sounds fine in theory, but will likely prove vacuous in practice.

Two measures of student performance are required: gains on MCAS exams, and some other measure (such as "tests designed by individual districts or academic departments").

Although the Globe believes that his proposal "is specific enough to guarantee rigorous evaluations, but open-ended enough to allow districts with different problems to contour the criteria to their needs," let me suggest that his proposal is sufficiently unspecific that it will never guarantee rigorous evaluations — precisely because it is open-ended enough to allow districts to contour criteria to their own desires.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

And the scams go on

The Boston Globe

March 24, 2011

THERE SEEMS to be a disconnect between Renée Loth's March 19 op-ed "[Tensions over pensions](#)" and the Globe report "[State's pension costs on the rise](#)" (Metro, March 20).

Loth argues that there is no real problem with pensions in Massachusetts, and writes, "The Globe's Spotlight Team has exposed some of the more egregious attempts to game the public pension system — and many of these scams have been corrected."

But the March 20 article states, "The number of state retirees collecting pensions of at least \$100,000 has climbed more than 20 percent in the past year, jumping from 145 to 176, with the top pensioner receiving more than \$240,000."

I would have to hazard the guess that when Loth wrote that "many of these scams have been corrected," she perhaps meant: "Some of these scams have been corrected, and can we now talk about something else?"

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Aid for needy children starts with their parents

Portland Press Herald

February 15, 2011

Dean Crocker, president and CEO of the Maine Children's Alliance, argues in a column that it would be counterproductive to cut spending for children in Maine (["Maine needs to be wary of cutting funds that give kids a start in life,"](#) Feb. 7).

As he states it, "Investing in our children now is the ounce of prevention that will stave off the need for a pound of cure later."

I would be more sympathetic to Mr. Crocker's position if he also discussed parental responsibility. For example, it is axiomatic (as least as far as I am concerned) that if a person cannot afford to feed, clothe or house a child, or does not know how to raise a child, he or she should not have children.

Take a look at who can receive child support services in Maine. There is absolutely no mention of whether or not a parent irresponsibly had a child they could not afford to care for, or did not know how to care for.

There is sometimes said to be a right to have children, but such a right should be balanced with a requirement that the parents also be responsible.

William Vaughan
Chebeague Island

Snow day? Think of it as distance learning

The Boston Globe

February 8, 2011

STUDENTS HAVE been getting a lot of snow days this year, but the requirement that they receive 180 days of that precious resource, school, means they may have to make up those days, perhaps at the end of the school year ([“State says snow days must be made up,”](#) Metro, Feb. 4).

Unfortunately, snow days represent a great opportunity that is always squandered. Students could be given assignments during days off, and tested on their mastery when they return. Those who had acquired the material could end their school year at the regular time.

Learning to work independently is great preparation for later life, but who will allow our students to learn that lesson?

William Vaughan Jr. Chebeague Island, Maine

Self-control is missing ingredient in education

Portland Press Herald

January 19, 2011

We should change our whole method of instruction from lecture and demonstration to self-guided achievement.

By WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.

Maine Voices

CHEBEAGUE ISLAND — Problems with educational achievement have been in the news for decades. The 1983 report “[A Nation at Risk](#)” stated: “What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur – others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.”

More recently, the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment found that in mathematics, U.S. students came in 31st (tied with Ireland and Portugal) and in reading 15th (tied with Poland and Iceland). Students in Shanghai, China, beat out all other countries. The 1983 report failed to wake us to the challenge.

There are certainly suggestions for change being made.

One is merit pay: If a teacher generates more learning, he or she would be paid proportionally more. That approach (along with most others, including No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top) makes the assumption that teachers are required for learning.

But in actuality, students would likely benefit if teachers were to play a much-reduced role. Most courses in high school and college involve students in a classroom being lectured to by a teacher or professor (I confess to having done some of that lecturing myself).

Classes meet at fixed times, move at a fixed pace and cover a fixed range of topics.

That organization is neither necessary nor desirable. Consider an alternative: Beginning in the first grade, each student is asked to complete some task on his or her own.

Students will vary in their ability to do so, but those who are able to do so would gradually be given more and more leeway in how they complete their assignments.

Conversely, those unable to do so would be required to spend more time in a structured environment.

Most of us realize that having the freedom to complete a task at our own pace is very rewarding (and that attending classes at fixed times is less so).

Most students exposed to such an arrangement should gradually learn to budget their time and complete their assignments on their own, a skill that is largely discouraged under the current approach to education.

Naturally, students working on their own would need to be evaluated from time to time. The result of such evaluations would in turn dictate whether students could incrementally increase their freedom, or whether it would be slightly curtailed.

In other words, those who did their work would be rewarded with greater freedom, and those who did not would not be so rewarded. This is merit pay for students, with the currency in the form of freedom from bureaucracy.

Consider some of the likely benefits of such an approach. As students able to work on their own leave the classroom, those remaining would receive more attention, attention they might well need.

In this way, students who had difficulty learning self-control would benefit from a greater teacher-student ratio.

Students who could learn self-control would be acquiring more than just an education.

They would be learning tools that would enhance their lives in general. Consider drug abuse. If this results even in part from impulsiveness, students trained in self-control might well be less susceptible.

Impulsiveness is also implicated in areas such as unwanted pregnancy and credit card debt. A person who has learned to budget his or her time might well be able to budget his or her expenses more easily than otherwise.

Apart from helping those who find it difficult to learn self-control, as well as those able to do so, such an approach has the potential to reduce the cost of education.

Much of the money that supports education is derived from property taxes, and, as many of us know, those taxes can be onerous (which is why Andrew Cuomo, the newly elected governor of New York, wants to cap them there).

If self-control were encouraged from an early age, we might find that high schools as we know them largely withered away. With that, associated expenses would likewise decline.

Such an approach could be tested on a small scale, and gradually ramped up as efficacious practices were empirically discovered.

This contrasts with national programs that impose standards on a top-down basis, and return some of our tax dollars if we behave in accordance with those standards.

Practice makes perfect (as Malcolm Gladwell argues in his best-selling book, "Outliers: The Story of Success," in which he says it takes 10,000 hours of experience to master a field of knowledge or performance).

By practicing self-control, students should be able to perfect their abilities to learn in a manner which suits them best.

- Special to The Press Herald

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Vaughan Jr., (e-mail: wvaughan@chebeague.net) is a behavioral psychologist living on Chebeague Island. This is excerpted from a work in progress.

Don't limit fuel tax breaks just to fishing boats alone

Portland Press Herald

January 4, 2011

The editorial on fuel-tax relief ("[Fuel-tax relief needed for Maine fishermen](#)," Dec. 29) makes the persuasive argument that since the purpose of the gas tax is to maintain roads and bridges, and since commercial fishermen don't use those facilities in their work, they should be exempted from the gas tax.

A little consistency is in order here.

Recreational boaters likewise pay a gas tax, and likewise don't use roads or bridges in their pursuit of pleasure. And when I mow my lawn, I'm not using roads or bridges.

The general principle that only those who use roads and bridges pay for them makes much more sense than a special exemption benefiting only one group of gas users.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Where's real fraud to be found?

Portland Press Herald

November 19, 2010

We've heard lots of noise lately about welfare reform, and I enjoyed The Press Herald's series showing abuse of the welfare system was not quite as rampant as many people thought.

I chuckled when the paper reported Nov. 10 ("[State fights lower-level abuses of welfare aid](#)") that the attorney general had bent to the winds of public opinion and her welfare fraud prosecutor had made three spectacular indictments of individuals defrauding the system.

The paragraph that stuck in my mind read, "The Attorney General's Office has historically pursued major fraud cases, including one in which it won a \$4.2 million settlement from Pfizer and another in which an ambulance company billed Maine-Care \$1 million for services it didn't provide."

Five days later I read with amusement, "Nutting chosen speaker of the House" and learned House Republicans had chosen a leader whose company had overbilled the state "at least \$637,477 and as much as \$2.3 million."

Figures in the "lower level abuses" article were between \$1,400 and \$10,000. So if I use the largest figure there to recoup the smallest number in the other article, it seems the welfare fraud prosecutor needs to indict 64 small-time abusers to catch up to Rep. Robert Nutting's wholesale abuse. I hope the prosecutor is planning on putting in some overtime, maybe working off the clock on those five furlough days.

Now we have a six-term representative with a history of welfare abuse chosen to lead the new majority.

At the end of it all, I want to ask all those people in the state who thought they were voting for change, "How do you like your blue-eyed boy?"

Or, in the words of Elvis Costello, "I used to be disgusted, but now I try to stay amused."

Phil Gaven
South Portland

You reported recently on a number of cases of welfare fraud in Maine.

In one case, that of [Leah Wright of Winslow](#), documents were filed as her benefits were about to run out, claiming that she was pregnant.

Pregnancy, as the article points out, allows a person to continue to receive benefits that would have otherwise terminated.

This is a case of fraud on two levels. The first (and obvious one) is that perpetrated by Ms. Wright. The more serious fraud is that perpetrated by the Legislature on the taxpaying citizens of Maine in providing benefits for poor women who become pregnant.

Getting out of poverty is a difficult task that is made that much more difficult if there are children involved. The situation is also that much more costly to taxpayers if there are children involved.

For those reasons, it is counterproductive to provide a benefit for pregnancy, since such a benefit would have the effect of making pregnancy that much more desirable.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Maine students aren't all that highly ranked

Portland Press Herald

October 9, 2010

In a recent Maine Voices column ("[Teachers work hard for kids](#)," Sept. 15), Mark L. Gray, executive director of the Maine Education Association, argued (against Ron Bancroft and Eliot Cutler) that "Maine's schools are doing well."

In partial support of this assertion, Mr. Gray stated: "In 2009, our fourth-grade students ranked seventh in the country in math and third in the country in reading. Also in 2009, our eighth-grade students ranked ninth in the country in math and sixth in the country in reading."

Unfortunately, these statements are misleading. The usual interpretation of "ranking seventh in the country" is that there are only six states doing better than Maine. But in fact eight states did better. Three of those states were tied, and those tied states were treated as just one rank by Mr. Gray.

Similarly, Maine fourth-graders in reading were not really third, they were 18th. Maine eighth-graders in math were not ninth, they were 19th. And Maine eighth-graders in reading were not sixth, they were 13th.

Bancroft and Cutler may be onto something after all.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Let consumers win at zero-sum game

The Boston Globe
September 28, 2010

AS YOU report in the Sept. 27 front-page article "[In poll, edge goes to sales tax cut](#)," there is some support to reduce the sales tax in Massachusetts from 6.25 to 3 percent. The article states, "The tax cut proposal . . . would slice \$2.5 billion from the state budget."

Since this is a report, and not an editorial, surely it makes sense to point out that the tax cut proposal would also put \$2.5 billion back into the pockets of consumers — money that might in turn get put back into the economy. And perhaps fewer people would be tempted to drive to tax-free New Hampshire for their purchases.

Why not eliminate the sales tax entirely and put twice as many billions of dollars back in the pockets of consumers?

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

ACT test score rise meaningless

Portland Press Herald

September 1, 2010

You report (“[Maine’s ACT scores up slightly as test takers top national averages](#),” Aug. 18) that students in Maine who took the ACT exam scored higher on average on all exams than the national average. Maine’s scores have also increased each year since 2006.

Although such results appear positive, it is likely they are also meaningless. Of all the states in the country, Maine had the lowest percentage of students taking the test, just 10 percent.

And which 10 percent would that be? In all probability, those most likely to do well on the test (which is more popular in the West, just as the SAT dominates in the East).

There were eight states in which at least 95 percent of the students took the test.

If Maine were one of those states, the results might mean something. But with only 10 percent of students taking the test, the results are, in all probability, of absolutely no significance.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Who decided equality is more important?

The Boston Globe

June 20, 2010

IN YOUR June 11 editorial "[Don't fault parents who reach into own pockets for schools](#)," you write, "Could parents in a wealthy part of town save teachers at their neighborhood school while the classrooms go wanting on the other side of town? That should never happen."

A little thought should show the fallacy inherent in this argument. Suppose parents in a wealthy part of town bought more books for their own children? Is that something "that should never happen"?

To criticize responsible (but costly) behavior because someone else lacks the means to engage in that behavior may result in equality, but who decided that equality is more important than letting those who want to help their own children do so?

William Vaughan Jr.,
Chebeague Island, Maine

Making bullying a crime raises problems

Portland Press Herald

May 16, 2010

Issues of free speech and privacy are inevitable, but there is another way to control the behavior.

Maine Voices

By WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.

CHEBEAGUE ISLAND - On May 3, Deval Patrick, governor of Massachusetts, [signed an antibullying law](#). It was heralded as a way to prevent harassment that has driven some youngsters to suicide.

While the aim of the law is certainly laudable, there are two questions that should be posed regarding this particular approach to the problem of bullying.

First, are there likely negative consequences to a law against bullying? And second, is there an alternative approach that is at least as effective, if not more?

If both questions can be answered in the affirmative, then laws against bullying should at least be viewed with some skepticism.

With respect to likely negative consequences, bullying often takes a verbal form, as opposed to a physical threat. Laws addressing such speech run up against our constitutionally protected free speech.

To the extent a student cannot call another "fat" or "short," the free speech of the first student could have been abridged. In any case, such things should be handled by educators and parents, not by the police.

That, however, is just the tip of the iceberg. A law against verbal bullying is necessarily vague when any statute should be precise about what is being outlawed.

For example, a [recent article](#) points out that the Massachusetts law "defines one form of bullying as 'repeated use' of a written, verbal or physical act that 'causes physical or emotional harm to the victim.'"

that subjective standard, [said Gavi Wolfe](#), legislative counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, "a student who calls another student 'loser' twice on the school bus and hurts the youngster's feelings could qualify as a bully" -- and thus also become a criminal.

Besides weakening free speech and being vague, antibullying laws constitute an intrusion of the government into our private affairs. The Massachusetts law stipulates that all students, from kindergarten through 12th grade, "participate" (whatever that means) every year in an antibullying curriculum.

Who will run such curriculums? What will they be paid? How much time will be spent? What if a student doesn't attend? The entire approach invites the creation of layers of bureaucracy. The lawyers will love it.

Is there an alternative to antibullying legislation? A lesson can be learned from an area of behavioral psychology called systematic desensitization, usually used to cure phobias.

Students could be gradually inoculated against bullying over the course of their education, as follows. At an early age, and in a structured setting, students would be exposed to very mild forms of bullying for short periods. For example, for one minute a student might be told, by other students, "You're not too

attractive.” And for one minute the student could respond to the criticism (“And your IQ is below average”).

Over the years the forms of criticism would gradually increase, as would their duration. And students would learn to fight back in an appropriate manner.

the time a student reached 12th grade, he or she should be able to tolerate sustained intense negative criticism, and respond in a comparable manner. Being called names would be no cause for concern, because the words would roll away like water off a duck’s back.

Consider Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old who killed herself because of bullying. According to one [article](#), “She told a friend that she was ‘not a tough girl’ and ‘would not know how to fight,’ and at one point she asked friends to surround her as she walked in the hall.”

However, being a “tough girl” is something that can be learned. And once learned, it can be used in any number of situations. If Phoebe Prince had been inoculated against bullying, she would be alive and those who bullied her would have learned that she couldn’t be toyed with.

But with antibullying laws in place, students will remain vulnerable to verbal aggression all their lives. If they feel they have been hurt they will run to the courts, which will be there like over-protective parents, ready to hug the hurt child.

Such an approach is counterproductive, but it’s the way we’re currently headed. We can do better, using the tools of behavioral psychology to fight the expansion of big government.

- Special to the Telegram

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Vaughan, Jr. (e-mail: wvaughan@chebeague.net) is a behavioral psychologist living on Chebeague Island.

Topless stroll uncovers mixed reaction

Portland Press Herald

April 8, 2010

Topless women marching through the streets of Portland? Gals, how can you do such an embarrassing, humiliating, undignified thing and still expect to be loved by a great guy and respected by him and others?

Whatever has happened to common decency, dignity and decorum? The fact that a man can get by with going topless in certain casual settings is in no way the same as a woman doing so.

I hardly think I need to give a lesson in anatomy and hormones. I am mortified to have this story from my beloved state of Maine flooding the news on TV and the Internet all across the country and the world!

Where is your sense of pride and self-respect? You're leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination of the menfolk.

Therefore, there's no longer such a thing as a romantic sense of mystery and intrigue when you march along, boobs bouncing and flopping.

It's not attractive, girls, and the sooner you realize that, the better for all of us!

Rosalie Welch-Johnson
Bangor

As you report ("[Marching for right to bare breasts, women faced with sea of cameras](#)," April 4), a number of women walked down Congress Street without shirts.

And predictably, there were "young men eagerly snapping away with cameras and cell phones."

If these louts had a little more forbearance, I expect women would feel freer to do as men can do any time.

As it is, these boors are ruining it for the women, for the rest of us and for themselves as well.

Thanks a lot.

William Vaughan, Jr.
Chebeague Island

Why should we pay for irresponsible choices of others?

The Boston Globe

March 20, 2010

AS REQUESTED by the March 16 editorial "[Mothers' lives at stake](#)," I undertook to "think of the expectant mothers who lack coverage, at risk to their lives and those of their babies."

And I in turn ask why a woman lacking such coverage would get pregnant. And why the Globe thinks such an irresponsible choice (for it is nothing else) should be financed by others.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Teacher as enabler

The Boston Globe
December 24, 2009

AS KARA Miller [reports](#), a student told her: “I’ll do better. I know I’ve gotten behind this semester, but I’m going to turn things around. Would it be OK if I finished all my uncompleted work by Monday?” And her reply? “Yes. But it’s important that you catch up completely this weekend, so that you’re not just perpetually behind.” Had she replied “no - your uncompleted work is just that, and will count against your final grade,” that student (and others like him or her) would eventually get on the ball. As it is, Miller is perpetuating precisely the behavior she complains about.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Bias for defendants dangerous

Portland Press Herald

October 25, 2009

Criminal defense lawyers Timothy Zerillo and Ron Schneider do a commendable job in teaching us how members of a jury should act when judging a defendant. In particular, they point out that “Maine law requires that the state’s evidence convince all jurors beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant is guilty.” (“Jurors right to acquit if case unproved,” Oct. 4.)

Unfortunately, there are two sides to the issue, and Zerillo and Schneider only mention one. The other side is this: if a person who committed a crime is allowed to go free, he or she will likely go on to commit more crimes, and other people will be encouraged to try their hand at crime.

There will, in all likelihood, be more victims than otherwise. But those victims do not figure in the calculations of Zerillo and Schneider.

So, rather than biasing the process in favor of a finding of innocence (a bias which is all too evident), the process should aim at finding the truth, using all the relevant tools of science.

Only then will the rest of us – potential victims of criminal predators that we are – be able to sleep soundly.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Rescued people ought to bear share of the cost

Portland Press Herald

August 20, 2009

An editorial in the Press Herald makes the argument that “essential” services (such as being rescued from the woods, having your house fire put out, and getting back your stolen vehicle) should be paid for by general taxation.

The argument is made that “it’s not enough to say that people should get billed for rescue when they are at fault. Should fire departments bill people who smoked in bed? Should the police recoup their expenses from someone who left his door unlocked?” (“Piscataquis County should foot teen’s bill,” Aug. 11)

Let me answer “yes” to these questions, for two reasons.

First, to the extent risky behavior is punished, it will occur less. Surely we all have a stake in seeing less smoking in bed. Subsidize the cost of doing so, and the behavior will occur more than otherwise.

And second, if one person’s risky behavior is paid for by others, then the taxes of those others will rise proportionally.

Unless we desire both more risky behavior and higher taxes, it makes little sense for the majority of people to pay for the mistakes of a few.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Why disempower active parents?

The Boston Globe

August 6, 2009

DAVID SEGAL, a state representative in Rhode Island, points out that some parents take an active interest in the education of their children, and some do not ([Op-ed](#), Aug. 3). Children without such active parents end up doing more poorly than the others.

In theory, at least, there are a number of ways to address this disparity. People who are unlikely to take good care of their children could be discouraged from having children in the first place. Or, if such people have children, they could be encouraged to become more engaged.

Representative Segal takes a third approach. He argues that parental involvement be replaced with state involvement, so that, to some extent, children with uninvolved parents would be on a par with those with involved parents.

This certainly moves toward greater equality. However, the cost is likely to be less involvement on the part of those parents who were originally instrumental in their children's education, since being so involved would have less of an effect.

Does this really make long-term sense?

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

What's right road for health care?

Portland Press Herald

June 10, 2009

Editorial Page Editor John W. Porter argues that in order for affordable health care to be available to all, there need to be a large number of regulations in place ("Down to details for health care reform," May 31).

For example, he argues that insurance companies should be required to charge the same premiums for all, regardless of pre-existing conditions.

It may be that it is health insurance itself that creates the high costs in the first place. With health insurance, there is no need for patients to shop around for the health care provider who gives the best value.

There is little incentive to exercise, not smoke and eat well. Is anyone ever denied coverage because he or she brought on the condition through poor choices? And health care providers have little incentive to lower costs, since whatever is charged will likely be covered.

If health insurance only covered catastrophic events (as automobile insurance does), Adam Smith's invisible hand would automatically work to lower costs.

And as an added benefit, the need for the numerous regulations that Porter mentions would largely be eliminated.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

American health care is vast, complex, expensive and disorganized. I applaud Sen. Olympia J. Snowe's attention to the thorny details of reform and ask that her first priority be an interoperable, national system of electronic medical records.

This system would help our country save billions of dollars wasted on duplicate testing and fraudulent billing practices alone.

A qualitative study led by a Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center research team included a Portland focus group that studied patient attitudes regarding electronic personal health records and electronic health information technology.

The results, published in the June 2009 Journal of General Internal Medicine, showed the public's willingness to accept and embrace these new methods of maintaining wellness and treatment.

Maine has dabbled in such studies for years. How much of the state's \$1.7 billion Health and Human Services budget could be saved if Maine had an electronic system in place?

Thank goodness Sen. Snowe is a valued member of the Senate Finance Committee developing the legislation to address our health care crisis.

We need her influence to provide affordable medical care, extensive prevention and wellness programs before taking a scalpel to that sticky thorn of insurance.

Margie M. Kelly
Cape Elizabeth

How about health care without health insurers?

When I go to my family doctor, he offers 10 percent off if I pay in cash. I know that lots of doctors do this. (And of course I pay cash since at age 63 I can't afford health insurance, regular or catastrophic.)

So that means my doctor believes just the paperwork to get claims paid adds 10 percent to the cost of doing business. That's not counting what the insurance companies and managed care organizations (sometimes the same business) skim off so that you and I get to see a doctor.

For sure, that must be at least 10 percent to 20 percent of health care costs. So there we have a total of up to 30 percent of U.S. health care costs before we get any actual care.

On the basis of this simple calculation, for the Obama administration to be asking insurers how they will save America health care money is absurd. On the other hand, for Republicans to worship at the foot of the insurers as if they are the ones who deliver you and me health care is folly.

Simple solution: Like Alexander Hamilton, who got Congress to assume the debts of the 13 individual states in order to build a strong new national government, just buy out the insurers and abolish health insurance.

We can save 30 percent on U.S. health care costs – that's hundreds of billions of dollars. And it will help make U.S. industry competitive with the other developed nations that have national health insurance.

It's a no-brainer.

James Harrod
Portland

Obviously your Another View commentator, Mike Shunney ("Nation needs single-payer system and nothing different," May 26), has not had any experience of a single-payer health system, so he speaks with little authority and contributes nothing of value to the debate.

Until individuals are given the opportunity to shop around for insurance in a competitive environment, we shall continue to see high prices and extraordinary growth in costs.

To compare the nation's health to our roads is specious at best. A better comparison would be with auto insurance. How many of us would want to see national auto insurance?

Where employees are covered by their companies, how many recognize that the premium comes out of their pay packet? How many would favor a tax-free pay hike of \$10,000 to buy their own insurance – with what would be their own money?

People are not as stupid as our political leaders would like them to be; they can be trusted to make wise decisions regarding their health just as they do in insuring their homes and other possessions.

Remove the shackles of government, set us free to take care of ourselves, and put a stop to this single-payer nonsense.

Bob Howell
Pemaquid

Vaughan, W. (2009). **Painless deprivation**. *Science*, 324, 1014.

In their Perspective (“[Pains and pleasures of social life](#),” 13 February, p. 890), M. D. Lieberman and N. I. Eisenberger argue that for every type of deprivation, there is an associated pain, and that the more deprived one is, the more pleasurable fulfilling the need will be. This harkens back to need-reduction theories of reinforcement, along the lines of Hull (1). However, there are numerous counterexamples [as Mazur (2) points out].

For example, rats need thiamine, but despite the fact that foods containing the nutrient would constitute “the salve that will take the pain away and satisfy the underlying need,” rats cannot detect thiamine in food, and so do not seek it out. Similarly, humans need oxygen, but carbon monoxide poisoning does not generate a pain. People instead fall asleep and die.

It is unclear whether a distinction between wants and needs (as the argument is sometimes framed) has implications for the basic argument made by Lieberman and Eisenberger regarding the representation of pleasure and pain in the brain, but it is certainly a distinction that should not be ignored.

William Vaughan Jr.

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The problem with taxing our earnings

The Boston Globe

May 22, 2009

CHANG-DIAZ and Eldridge [claim to know](#) what is fair in taxation: “A fair tax system asks residents to contribute to the cost of government services based on their ability to pay.” While this position may seem axiomatic to them, there is an alternative approach, and one that has more of a right to be called fair: One could pay based on the cost of services that one consumed. Go into a grocery store, and what you pay at the counter is based on what you put into your cart, not on your ability to pay. The same principle holds in purchasing a home or car, or using a toll highway. If the cost of such things were based on one’s ability to pay, the incentive to do better in life would largely be wiped out: You might earn more, but the loaf of bread you bought would in turn cost more. And that is exactly the problem with basing one’s taxes on what one earns, rather than on the government services that one consumes.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.

Chebeague Island, Maine

If state workers' pay public, how about quality of work?

Portland Press Herald

April 26, 2009

While I am in agreement with the paper's position that the salaries of people working for the state should be public knowledge ("Names and wages of public employees should stay public," April 19), that information is, unfortunately, only half of the whole story.

The other half is what each person contributes. If one teacher does a fine job and is paid the same as a slacker, there is a problem. And such a problem would not become known under the current system.

Therefore, let us know both what a person receives from the state, and what he or she contributes to the state. By taking the ratio of those two quantities, we would all be able to decide whether there are disparities that should be rectified.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Hook, line, they sink

The Boston Globe

March 29, 2009

[“BRING THIS fishery back”](#) makes the argument that a new approach to how many fish can be taken will help fish stocks come back: Local cooperatives will be allowed to land some percentage of the entire catch, with the absolute amount going up if stocks rebound. Making the transition, however, may require that some money be provided to fishermen during the interim.

It is the fishermen who created the problem because of their overfishing. Let those who created the problem live with the consequences of their choice.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Same-sex marriage columns create dissent

Portland Press Herald

March 14, 2009

In his column in favor of same-sex marriage, Editorial Page Editor John W. Porter quotes Thomas Jefferson to the effect that institutions should change to keep pace with contemporary findings (“It’s time to enact same-sex marriage,” March 8).

I have nothing against same-sex marriage, but there is one assumption made by Porter with which I disagree: that it is the state that should control who can get married in the first place.

Why should some people (perhaps the majority) say that a person should or should not be able to marry someone of the same sex? Why should some people say that three (or more) people should or should not be able to marry?

As Porter quotes Jefferson: “We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.”

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

It’s disappointing that John W. Porter’s polarizing same-sex marriage column failed to display any respect for the opposition’s opinion but rather displayed his disdain.

There are sound, logical arguments in favor of defining marriage as it now stands, as other relationships were not intended by God. Legislating otherwise promotes the very behavior that our Creator rejected.

While Porter proclaims millions of children “thrive” in nontraditional families, studies find children’s overall health is strongest through a similarly gendered relationship.

The success of nonprofits providing gender-matching mentors to children in need of this structure proves that while the intentions of same-sex marriage may be “good,” the outcome isn’t always mutually beneficial to everyone potentially involved (i.e. a gay couple raising an oppositely gendered child).

The history and tradition of marriage holds that such unification is made between one man and one woman, before God and within the scope of faith. Arguing that gay couples should marry in order to obtain the same legal rights as heterosexual couples is therefore a clear infringement on church/state separation.

Porter argues this debate shouldn’t be before the courts. With this I agree, for the people should decide. Holding consistent his philosophy, Porter must unequivocally support overturning *Roe v. Wade* – an equally paramount decision rendered by seven appointed, not elected, judges on behalf of our country’s cumulative 300 million inhabitants, and on those whom will never inhabit it.

Opposing views aside, surely we can agree that this debate can be respectful and healthy, as we find common ground and go forward together.

Seabren Reeves
Brunswick

John W. Porter's column of March 8 calls for an "enlightened view of marriage" as a basis for allowing same sex marriage in Maine.

It's evident that Mr. Porter and others have formed their opinions out of compassion and concern for gay people who feel oppressed and want the right to marry.

The problem with this view is that the basic rights afforded to married people in Maine already exist for same-sex couples under domestic partnership laws. The argument is, therefore, not about fairness or ending oppression, but rather, in redefining the institution of marriage.

Monogamous marriage between a man and a woman has been recognized for millenia, and across many civilizations, to be the ideal structure for building families for the good of themselves and of society.

Though the frailty of our human nature causes problems for many couples, traditional marriage still creates the greatest potential for the successful continuation of a justly ordered culture.

This view is not unenlightened. Rather, it is in line with centuries of rigorous, informed philosophy regarding the dignity of the human person, which is never served by attempting to redefine who a person really is.

Same-sex marriage redefines both marriage and the person. The idea of same-sex marriage is more of a reflection of our fallen human nature than of informed human reason.

That doesn't seem like enlightenment at all.

Laura McCown
Falmouth

Columnist Greg Kesich may be a good writer, but he fails when it comes to reasoning and logic. He assumes that he has an airtight case for same-sex marriage if opponents cannot explain why an accused murderer is given a marriage license ("Same-sex marriage foes should take the Sam Collins test," March 4).

The reason why a same-sex couple is denied a marriage license is very simple: Same-sex coupling is not marriage. Marriage is by its very nature the coupling of a male and a female.

Calling same-sex relationships "marriage," no matter how committed or legally recognized, is like children playing house. They can pretend all day long, but children playing house are not married, are not parents, and are not family. It's all a game.

If same-sex marriage is legalized in Maine, same-sex couples who "marry" will have a legal (de jure) but not an actual or real (de facto) marriage.

Marriage is between a man and a woman; it always has been and always will be.

Pastor Sandy Williams
First Baptist Church of Freeport

End sales tax disparity by ending tax

Portland Press Herald

January 19, 2009

In an editorial on sales tax (“Online retailers should also have to collect sales tax,” Jan. 15) the Press Herald argues that fairness dictates that just as purchases made at stores in Maine require the payment of a sales tax, so online sales should require such a tax.

The editorial ends with the injunction, “Congress should end this disparity.”

There is more than one way to end this disparity. Rather than argue for an increase in our taxes (and aren’t they high enough as it is?), why not argue for an end to the sales tax altogether?

Let those who enjoy the services bought by those taxes pay for those services themselves, keep the Internet free of sales tax, reduce our tax burden and end this disparity. All with one simple step.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Not enough jail time for LaPointe

Portland Press Herald

November 18, 2008

As the newspaper pointed out in its editorial ("Sentence sends a message about one man's bad choices," Nov. 14), Robert LaPointe spent a day drinking and, later that night, drove his racing boat across a lake at high speed, killing two people.

The editorial goes on to state that while one may be tempted "to look for public policy interventions that could have prevented this tragedy," the only thing that could have prevented this incident would have been LaPointe's "own good judgment."

This, unfortunately, is a classic case of wringing one's hands. We do not have to wait for the good judgment of people like LaPointe, and there are public policy interventions that could have prevented this tragedy.

For example, 3 1/2 years is a relatively short time to serve for killing two people.

Make it 20 years (which would constitute a public policy intervention) and we would likely find that the judgment of people like LaPointe would be suitably changed.

Punishment works, and more of it would help reduce the number of incidents such as this.

William Vaughan, Jr.

Chebeague Island

The sheer magnitude of the current lack of accountability, nationally and regionally, is truly mind-boggling.

The closing of the case of Robert LaPointe, the man directly responsible for the early deaths of Terry Raye Trott and Suzanne Groetzinger, verges on unbelievable.

LaPointe, alcoholically influenced, going at a very high rate of speed, at night, in a high-powered boat, crashed into and killed Trott and Groetzinger, who were in their small boat, star-gazing.

The jail sentence of 3 1/2 years is woefully inadequate, as is his time being served in a medium- security prison in Windham, rather than our state prison in Warren.

Justice Robert Bob Crowley, stating that LaPointe's lack of remorse was stunning, still did not mete out the full five years that the guidelines permitted.

The public was not served. This sentence is an insult to all of us.

The fact that our very own district attorney, Stephanie Anderson, said that she was satisfied by these results is quite off-putting.

This man was tried for two counts of manslaughter and the jury deadlocked. Big deal. Roll up your sleeves, spend money, and go back to work. This is about justice. It was not served.

There are a lot of people going off to state prison for a lot longer for far less serious misdeeds.

Zoo Cain
South Portland

Tax on soft drinks, beer a bad deal

Portland Press Herald

October 17, 2008

Voting “yes” on Question 1 is not just a repeal of taxes on beverages, but a repeal of taxing the sick.

This law taxes at 1.8 percent the reimbursements that individuals receive from their health insurance companies. It is an unequal tax that puts a greater burden on the chronically ill, while those that are healthy and do not utilize their insurance do not pay.

One thing I think important to remember is that the state has a law requiring insurance companies to provide all interested parties insurance. The move over the last several years by Anthem is to offer a policy that is continually not prudent for the chronic patient to buy; insurance with a higher premium and lower deductible than with other types of policies which have larger deductibles.

Anthem’s yearly requests for policy premium increases on low-deductible policies with maximum use by the insured is at a far greater percentage than on other premiums. This becomes a truly unreasonable price to pay.

Now we are asked to pay tax on money paid to hospitals and doctors, sometimes passed through our hands and sometimes paid directly.

Essentially, the sicker you are, the more tax you pay. This is a burden on those individuals already struggling to stay afloat while facing critical health issues.

Michael Walek, York

According to your article, “Coalition pushes to keep drink tax” (Oct. 7), the group in favor of taxes on wine, beer and soda (No on One) argues that the cost to the rest of us would be still higher without those taxes.

As Dr. Lisa Letourneau of Scarborough puts it, “We’re paying one way or the other.”

For anyone who has failed to notice, the commonly accepted name for a transaction such as this is extortion.

William Vaughan Jr., Chebeague Island

Are we all supposed to pay for everything for everyone?

Portland Press Herald

August 27, 2008

Grace Braley of Portland complains in a letter about the high cost of health care (“Health care costs need to be affordable for all,” August 23). She concludes: “Where is the analysis that would work to bring health care costs into place as accessible for everyone?”

Let me pose a different question: Why should anything (including food, clothing, housing, heating, transportation, medicine, and a visit to the doctor or hospital) have a cost that makes it accessible for everyone?

To put it differently, if any of those things were to be accessible for everyone, then those who could afford them would pay for them, and then would be forced to pay the cost for those who could not afford them.

And that, in my book, is pure and simple theft.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

In the Income Gap, No ‘Give-backs’

The Boston Globe

August 20, 2008

DERRICK Z. Jackson (“[Politely declining to touch the income gap](#),” Op-ed, August 19) points out that since 1989, while the median income for the richest 20 percent of Massachusetts residents went up, it stayed constant for those in the middle, and dropped for the poorest 20 percent. He continues: “But closing the gap is difficult for Obama or McCain to claim as a top priority, because it means directly challenging the top 20 percent to give back to their country.”

The implicit assumption communicated by the phrase “give back” is that those people in some sense stole their money, rather than earned it. This may be true in some cases, but is dubious as a general rule.

This language also reinforces the idea that middle- and lower-income earners are victims, so we need to find the culprits that brought this about. In other words, there is no necessity for these people to get a better education (or whatever else will get them ahead) and pull themselves up by their bootstraps (a phrase we seldom hear anymore).

Let me suggest that less talk of victimhood and more discussion of personal responsibility might in and of itself help to close that income gap.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Personal views influence interpretation of the Bible

Portland Press Herald

June 23, 2008

Philip E. Kennard of Windham makes the argument that homosexuality is a sin, based on his reading of Corinthians 6:9. By repenting, however, they can be redeemed (“With Jesus’ love, repentant gays can achieve redemption,” June 20).

There is always a potential problem with arguments from authority (of which this is one). Suppose the Bible had stated that heterosexuality was a sin, and homosexuality a virtue. What then?

Mr. Kennard could, under such circumstances, make a number of choices. He could choose to ignore this particular teaching (and there are numerous messages in the Bible that are, and should be, routinely ignored, such as “If your right eye offends you, pluck it out”).

He could choose to become a homosexual, although I doubt very much that a person’s orientation is due to choice. Or he could reject Christianity entirely (perhaps Buddhism would be more to his liking).

But whatever his choice under such conditions, in the end, it is his choice. Likewise, making reference to a particular passage in the Bible that condemns homosexuality is also his choice. Mr. Kennard’s letter, in other words, tells us more about his personal feelings than it tells us about the Bible.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Light sentences send wrong message to young offenders

Portland Press Herald

June 8, 2008

Greg Kesich argues that the brains of young people are not fully mature, giving them, as he says, a greater capacity for change (“Adolescents are too young to give up on,” June 4). This greater capacity for change, commonly expressed in the negative as, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” in turn means they should receive a lesser sentence than an older person for the same crime.

This “greater capacity for change,” however, cuts both ways. If young people receive light sentences, they are thereby learning the lesson that self-control is not necessary, a lesson they may well carry with them throughout life.

Consider the case of Lionel Tate. At age 12 he killed a 6-year-old girl and in 2001 was given a life sentence.

In 2004, he was freed because of the ruling of an appeals court and given 10 years probation.

In 2005, he robbed a pizza deliveryman at gunpoint, violating the terms of his probation, and was subsequently given a 30-year sentence.

All of this suggests that what Tate learned from his three years of incarceration for murder is that he could get away with it.

A tougher sentence in the first place might have driven the lesson home that crime doesn’t pay.

William Vaughan

Chebeague Island

There's more than one side to the issue of health care

Portland Press Herald

May 21, 2008

In arguing in favor of universal health care, John W. Porter points out that in Maine, the law limits how much insurance companies can charge a person, in spite of the services that person might require ("Clinton health plan the better way," May 18).

As he puts it: "That seems fair. People shouldn't be turned away from getting a policy when they need it, nor should they have to pay a lot for coverage because they've got a family history of disease or have other risk factors they can't control."

Keeping the facts as they are, consider this way of presenting them: "If a person requires more services for health care than others, for whatever reason, it is only fair that his or her neighbors be forced to pay for those services."

Does this position really make sense?

Further, why does Mr. Porter give us only the one perspective? Is he trying to convince us of something we wouldn't accept if we were given both sides of the story?

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Can't Have Property Rights, Economic Justice as Well

Portland Press Herald

May 13, 2008

Jo Ann Myers of Waldoboro writes that “anti-tax groups are working to undermine a core democratic principle in which taxes are used to achieve broad economic justice.”

She goes on to point out that the taxes she has in mind support Dirigo Health (“We should support taxes to pay for health care,” May 9).

I happen to consider the Bill of Rights a “core democratic principle,” and therein one finds these words: “... nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.”

One can either have property rights (as spelled out in the Fifth Amendment, for example) or one can have “broad economic justice,” which to my mind is suspiciously close to Karl Marx’s “From each according to his ability to each according to his needs.”

But, given that they contradict each other, you can't have both.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Another View: Do Our Genes Not Only Determine Who We Are but What We Do?

Portland Press Herald

April 29, 2008

The idea of holding people responsible for their actions could produce test-tube alibis.

William Vaughan, Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

In an editorial on genetic discrimination (“Genetic tests shouldn’t be misused for discrimination,” April 28), the newspaper points out that a bill being considered by Congress would mean that people with a genetic predisposition toward disease would not have to pay more for their health insurance.

As least part of the basis for this approach is the fact that people are not responsible for their genes. As the editorial states: “Inherited traits that affect health are not something people are responsible for, as they are for alcohol abuse, tobacco use or overeating.”

That line, between what we are responsible for and what is beyond our control, is fast disappearing. For example, a gene called CYP2A6 appears to be involved in the metabolism of nicotine, and makes smoking more pleasurable.

In rats, a gene has been found that reduced the tolerance for alcohol, suggesting a genetic basis for finding alcohol pleasurable. And one study involving twins has found that weight is more influenced by genes than diet or exercise.

And, going further, there is talk of a “DNA defense” based on a genetic predisposition toward violent behavior that would tend to exonerate certain criminals.

Indeed, the influence of genes is so ubiquitous, it is unlikely that any aspect of our lives is entirely independent of them.

The banning of genetic discrimination, then, will have far-ranging consequences, and the common theme of those who are no longer held responsible will be, “I couldn’t help it.”

Be careful what you wish for ...

About the Author

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Data Could Back up Use of High-tech Gadget in Class

Portland Press Herald

January 21, 2008

The article, "High-tech board enhances learning" (January 14), appears to promise much. Unfortunately, it provided little or no evidence that more learning is occurring because of the device in question.

While one student reported that it "helped him grasp concepts more easily," this is little more than anecdotal. I have nothing against technology in the classroom, but I do have something against statements that promise much but fail to back up that promise with real data.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Pulling Strings to Fight Fires

The Boston Globe

January 6, 2008

THE PLEADING, whining, and winning that put William Hayhurst III at the top of the hiring list for a position with the Boston Fire Department is the perfect example of the enabling of a child and the entitlement expected by him (["Law put candidate atop Fire Dept. list,"](#) Page A1, December 30).

Entitled to become a firefighter because his father was a firefighter? He did relatively poorly on the civil service exam in three tries. If he had put more of the energy he devoted to pleading into studying, we might not be reading about him today.

Passing a state law to let him jump to the head of the hiring list should make every elected official involved cringe with guilt.

But that would be wishful thinking on my part.

CAROL SCOTT

South Chatham

IN SOUNDING the alarm on cronyism within the civil service personnel system, the Globe sidesteps a glaring central issue ("Cronyism to the rescue," Editorial, January 2).

Families of police officers and firefighters who have died in the line of duty deserve much from us: honor, regard, and financial safeguards, to name a few. But what logic could possibly support the established and somehow legal practice of bumping these family members to the top of firefighter and police hiring lists irrespective of mandatory exam scores?

The "overly receptive politicians" who pulled the strings for William Hayhurst III, whose father did not die in the line of duty, are no trailblazers. They merely nudged up the bar on a system that was already fouled with contempt for fairness and public safety.

CLAYTON SCOBLE

Cambridge

IS THERE any doubt why citizens distrust politicians and their back-scratching, unethical conduct after reading about the special law passed for the Hayhurst brothers?

This reprehensible, unethical behavior by the named legislative and executive branch officials should be discussed in every school civics class as precisely the kind of activity that brings shame on the government process. If ever a law was passed that should be overturned by the courts, this is it.

As for the Hayhursts, they may have been successful in manipulating the legal process to their benefit, but their name and reputation will be forever stained.

ROGER ANDERSON

Brimfield

IN YOUR editorial you write, "Boston's association of minority firefighters is crying foul that Hayhurst, who is white, leapfrogged minorities with better scores."

Is this not a little ironic? In the article “Law put candidate atop Fire Dept. list,” the reporter wrote, “For 30 years, a federal court order required the department to hire one black applicant for every white applicant it hired.”

Surely during those 30 years there were cases in which black applicants leapfrogged white applicants with better scores. Otherwise, the court order would have been meaningless.

I would have a little more sympathy for those minority firefighters if they argued in favor of fairness for all.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Columnist's Views on Prejudice in Question

Portland Press Herald

December 9, 2007

John W. Porter writes, with regard to race and immigration, "...subtle and institutionalized prejudice inflicts the pain of 1,000 paper cuts on people of color every day" ("Race-based politicking alive, still ugly," December 2).

The implication of this statement is that racial prejudices are something that whites inflict on people of color.

However, this is really a two-way street. A number of years ago, I perused an ad for a position at the University of New England. It read, in part: "The University of New England is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer and welcomes female and minority candidates."

Given that it welcomes female and minority candidates, what position does it take toward white males such as myself?

Is it indifferent? It is unwelcoming?

I have no idea. But I can say, with no hesitation, that this is just as much a case of racial (and sexual) prejudice as the kind that Porter mentions.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Education matters

Portland Press Herald

October 30, 2007

Three years ago, as a high school senior, I would not have guessed that I would be in college and making the dean's list. I did not exactly excel in high school; in fact, I barely scraped by to graduation.

When the reality of life after high school faced me, based on my past academic history, I did not think I was cut out for college.

But I was lucky to have parents who pressed me to fill out one college application -- just one. I sent the application off, and a year later, I was college bound. In the last three years, I have gone from a lackluster high school student to an engaged and dedicated college student.

While I was fortunate enough to have parents who pushed me to fill out that application, not all of my friends did.

That's why I am in favor of a new state policy to add the completion of a college application to the requirements for high school graduation in Maine. The choice to submit the application will still be up to students and their families.

The new policy, sponsored by Speaker of the House Glenn Cummings, will help to open opportunities to many more of Maine's young people by sending them the message that there is a college out there for them -- all they have to do is apply.

Mike Moran

Portland

In response to Ron Bancroft's Oct. 23 column praising high-stakes testing, let us be aware of the well-researched downsides to this strategy:

- It greatly increases drop-outs, sometimes called push-outs. Bancroft is apparently unaware of the disastrous results in Massachusetts, which he cites as an example for Maine.
- It narrows the curriculum to what is tested, eliminating much of value and interest to students and to our society.
- It demoralizes teachers and deprofessionalizes them as they are forced to teach to a standardized test.
- The test itself is usually not targeted to the kinds of competencies we need for the modern world, belying Bancroft's assertion that a good test is worth teaching to. Who among us believes that standardized tests have been a fair and accurate measure of our learning or competence?
- Pressure and the fear of failure do not increase motivation for all students, but in fact cause many of our most vulnerable students to give up.
- Tests have historically been used not to raise all to a high standard but rather to sort and select the good from the bad. It is a strategy that favors those who are already advantaged by our society and works against the disadvantaged.

The fact is that we have been using student testing as a strategy to improve schools for decades. It hasn't

worked, and to simply raise the stakes on these tests is a failure of imagination and a tragic disservice to our students, teachers, state and nation.

Ken Jones
Associate Professor of Education
University of Southern Maine
Westbrook

The article “Laptops enhancing students’ writing, study finds” (Oct. 24) states that Maine students have improved their writing skills as a result of using laptops.

This was based on a [report](#) from the Maine Education Policy Research Institute at the University of Southern Maine, which compared writing scores for two years, 2000 and 2005. For 2000, the average writing score was 534.11, while for 2005 it was 537.55, representing a significant improvement.

Going online, I found the average score for eighth-grade writing from 1999-2000 was 534 (presumably rounded from 534.11). Over the next five years, the average scores were 536, 536, 537, 537, and 537. There was an improvement between the 1999-2000 testing period and the 2000-2001 testing period, and the scores are basically flat after that.

When were laptops introduced? An article in this paper on March 9, 2002 “Kids at test school welcome laptops” states: “The laptops that arrived Friday (March 8, 2002) at Lyman Moore, courtesy of Maine taxpayers, were among the first to be distributed to schools as part of Gov. Angus King’s four-year plan to supply all of the state’s seventh- and eighth-graders with laptop computers.”

Given that writing scores improved between the 1999-2000 and the 2000-2001 testing periods and not thereafter, and that laptops were beginning to be introduced in March 2002, the improvement in writing scores occurred prior to the introduction of laptops.

Consequently, this report provides no evidence that laptops are responsible for any improvement in writing.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection Offers Answers

Portland Press Herald

October 9, 2007

Patsy Arrouet (Voice of the People, September 29) asks various questions regarding changes in wild populations, as reported in the article "Study indicates species change quickly to adapt to threats," September 24.

For example, Michael Kinnison, Andrew Hendry and Thomas Farrugia found "Bighorn sheep now have smaller horns than they used to, a change that makes them less likely to get shot by hunters."

This, as the article points out, is a case of natural selection.

Arrouet asks: "How does the bighorn sheep determine that his big horns attract hunters in the first place?"

She continues: "There are many factors influencing change. Could be their creator is at work."

In this case, the simplest explanation is that hunters kill those with large horns, making those with smaller horns more fit in that particular environment, and thus more likely to have offspring.

There is no need to assume that the animals know that the large horns attract hunters, and no need to make any assumptions regarding a creator at work.

Kinnison's theories may make little sense to Arrouet, as she points out, but that is not because the theories lack coherence.

A more likely explanation is that Arrouet has not taken the time and effort to understand how Darwin's theory of natural selection actually works.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

I read the letter by Patsy Arrouet and thought I would take a shot at alleviating her confusion.

Here goes. If you kill off all the large-horned sheep, the genetic pool left will tend to produce smaller horns.

And, the sheep don't have to think/know anything -- thus lessening the chance they will be shot.

This plays out for the large-headed snakes changing their reproductive pool by unknowingly destroying the genes that produce large-headed snakes. Again, they don't have to know anything.

And that results in small-headed snakes that cannot commit suicide eating poison frogs.

That is why there are the Darwin awards for people who do things that cause their own demise.

And we are talking/writing about a Darwinian process. I hope this clears up the concept for anyone else who is confused.

Peter Simpson
Rockport

Life, in Stages
The Boston Globe
August 24, 2007

SHARON POWELL, in her August 17 letter “Lethal injections,” writes in opposition to the use of potassium chloride to end pregnancies, a practice that has come about in response to the Supreme Court decision upholding the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act.

She calls a fetus an “unborn fetus,” then “a baby, let’s not forget,” and finally asks, “Why are we killing our children?”

Blurring the lines to make a point is a standard tactic in any argument, but at times it makes sense to draw distinctions to make a point. And one distinction that should be made here is that a fetus is a fetus, not an unborn fetus, not a baby, and certainly not a child.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Revaluations Not Always Good for Property Owners

Portland Press Herald

August 9, 2007

Regarding the editorial "Property taxes less fair without revaluations" (July 31), you assume that new or more recent revaluations are always better. Below are examples from the 2004 city of Portland revaluations:

1. One-third of recent sales are assessed below their selling price or "just value."
2. More than half of commercial properties are assessed below their selling prices.
3. Commercial properties are assessed based on a return on investment and not their selling price.
4. The state property tax division gives "lip service" to local assessments due to lack of funds and staffing.
5. Residential property owners cannot appeal their assessment at the state level, but commercial property owners are afforded that benefit.
6. The inherent assumptions of regression analysis used to develop the 2004 revaluations guarantee that some people will pay less than their fair share, while others will pay far more than their fair share.
7. There appears to be a lack of understanding of uniformity of assessments principles by the city of Portland officials.

To make the statement that revaluations are better and more fair than existing assessments is truly irresponsible. All property revaluations are wholly dependent on the competence of the firm hired and the officials who review their work.

Sidney Gerard
Peaks Island

In your editorial on revaluation of property values in Kennebunkport, you state: "When it comes to property taxes, the definition of fairness is for those whose property is worth more to pay more."

You can, of course, define fairness any way you like, but that doesn't necessarily make it objective in any real sense.

I could say that the definition of fairness is for those who consume more services to pay more. For example, anyone who drives on the Maine Turnpike pays in proportion to the distance traveled.

This is fair by my definition, but yours would require some other calculation.

The only way to choose between such competing definitions is to construct a lengthy argument spelling out the pros and cons of each, something you certainly failed to do.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Tax-onomy

The Boston Globe

May 31, 2007

IN THE article "[Voters in Mass. communities increasingly reject overrides](#)" (Page A16, May 27), I read the following: "Voters in nearly 60 percent of Massachusetts communities considering property tax increases this year have turned them down, one of the worst approval rates in recent years."

Would it be fair to say that this is also one of the best rejection rates in recent years?

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Distinct Difference Between Fetus and Unborn Baby

Portland Press Herald

April 16, 2007

M.D. Harmon uses the term “unborn babies” to refer to fetuses in his argument against abortion (“Legislature takes up issues of life -- from the other side,” March 30), in an attempt to diminish the difference between a fetus and a baby.

By this logic, an egg is an unfertilized fetus, a fetus an unborn baby, a baby an immature adult and an adult an undead corpse.

And by transitivity, an egg is an unfertilized, unborn, immature and undead corpse.

If Harmon’s argument made intrinsic sense, he wouldn’t have to rely on a tortured use of language to get us to accept his conclusion.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Fear Itself

The Boston Globe

April 3, 2007

I WAS sorry to see your front-page headline yesterday: "[Mayor tries to quell fear after killings.](#)"

Fear is the appropriate response to killings and other forms of mayhem.

Rather than tell people not to be afraid, I suggest Mayor Menino do something to quell the killings.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Online, All the Time

The New York Times

February 19, 2007

To the Editor:

We are fast approaching the time when nearly any fact can be looked up or verified by going online (“[Supercharged With All the Answers](#),” Thursday Styles, Feb. 15), often by means of a small hand-held device. While such progress may appeal to many, there is also a downside.

Just as the car reduced our need to walk (and so contributes to obesity) and the calculator reduced our need to manipulate numbers (and so contributes to ignorance of mathematics), instant access to information will reduce our need to learn information.

What this will contribute to is anyone’s guess, but I would suggest that shallow thinking along obvious lines will be one result.

At a time when the world is becoming more complex and interconnected, this is not a goal we should be pursuing.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine, Feb. 15, 2007

Jack up Fines to Deter U-turns on Highways

Portland Press Herald

February 7, 2007

Your report that the problem of people making U-turns on the Maine Turnpike appears to be getting worse and has resulted in a number of accidents (“Turnpike trying to put brakes on U-turn temptation,” January 15).

One partial solution involves closing some crossovers, in spite of the fact they are used by snowplows and emergency vehicles.

Consider the fact that Trooper Michael Cook says he gives out several \$165 citations each month for people using crossovers. To me, a fine of \$165, coupled with the low probability of being caught, is no big deal.

Let me make a suggestion: Keep the crossovers, and make that ticket on the order of two grand or so (with signs indicating that fact), and most of the problem would probably immediately go away.

Punishment works, and a little more in this particular situation would probably work wonders.

William Vaughan, Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Commission's tax plan driven by faulty premise

Portland Press Herald

December 27, 2006

You come home and find your neighbor going through your desk.

You demand to know what he's doing, and he replies that, as a result of a lifetime of smoking, he needs money to cover the cost of his treatment for emphysema.

You demand to know what right he has to your hard-earned money for a health condition that he brought on himself.

He replies that while his method of getting the money is a little suspect, the basic principle that those with money should be required to give to those with health problems is well-established, and therefore you should pay up.

This may sound like a complete fabrication, but it actually reflects the work of a commission seeking \$57 million more to pay for health-care reform in Maine ("New taxes recommended to pay for Dirigo Health," December 20).

That's \$57 million more a year. On the table are increases in taxes for cigarettes, beer, wine, snacks, bottled soft drinks and syrups.

And the principle? There is none whatsoever, apart from the fact that these sources of revenue may result in the smallest outcry from those being fleeced.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

College expenses rise but achievement doesn't

Portland Press Herald

Tuesday, November 14, 2006

By William Vaughan Jr.

MAINE VOICES

College expenses are rising faster than inflation. According to the College Board, while the Consumer Price Index rose by 3.4 percent last year, college expenses rose by 5.5 percent.

This year, a public four-year university costs on average \$12,796, while a private four-year college or university costs on average \$30,367.

With these expenses in mind, consider that in practically every profession, a person is expected to do some job and is evaluated on how well the job is completed. The amount a person earns often depends on that evaluation.

This entirely reasonable standard, however, does not apply to college teaching. By and large, no one knows precisely what professors teach and no one knows how well they teach it.

Should you doubt this, contact a randomly chosen department head at a local college or university and ask who in that department is best able to teach.

Which professors are best able to get their students to understand the concepts those students should understand?

Which professors, in other words, are doing their jobs best? "I'm sorry," you will be told. "We don't have that information available."

Next, consider a recent report from the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. It found that on multiple-choice questions about American history, government, foreign affairs and the economy, the average score of seniors was 53.2, which in turn was just 1.5 points higher than the scores for freshmen.

In some cases seniors knew less than freshmen, which the institute characterized as "negative learning." This is just one of a number of reports all coming to the same conclusion.

Is there a causal relation between these two items? Are students doing poorly because professors are held accountable to no one, in spite of the large amounts spent on education?

In all likelihood, the fact that professors are free to teach pretty much what they want, in any manner they want, contributes to the poor showing of our college students when it comes to general knowledge.

Is this approach the only one available? No. There are straightforward ways to begin seeing what students are actually learning and retaining.

Let me suggest two standards to measure progress.

First, we do not know what a professor expects his or her students to be able to do as a function of having taken a specific course. There might be a catalog description of the course, but such descriptions are general and vague.

In order to discover what professors expect their students to learn, then, let them publish those goals on-line. Let them precisely specify what a student who has taken the course should be able to do as a result.

Second, it is the professors themselves who evaluate their students. They are, in effect, evaluating their own teaching effectiveness. There is no reason why this should be. There is too much room for conflict of interest, bias and sheer laziness.

So, in order to discover what students have actually learned, let an outside agency evaluate those students, following the specifications as laid out by the professor.

For example, if a professor says his or her students should be able to solve particular classes of mathematical problems, let that be tested impartially. These results should also be published on-line. With these two standards in place, anyone would be able to find out both what a particular professor thinks he or she is teaching, and how much of that material students are actually learning and retaining.

Surely this is not too much to expect. Surely we should be able to find out what we are paying to achieve.

Can we afford to continue in the current direction? I believe we cannot afford to have poorly educated students, and we should not be paying top-dollar fees for what too often is an inferior education.

More transparency with respect to both what is taught and to how well it is taught would, I believe, begin to address the problem of poor educational achievement in this country.

- Special to the Press Herald

About the Author

William Vaughan Jr. (e-mail: wvaughan@chebeague.net) owns an educational service on Chebeague Island and teaches part-time at the University of Southern Maine.

Assess positive elements of teachers earning merit pay

Portland Press Herald

November 9, 2006

I am writing in response to Melba Boynton of Nobleboro, who wrote a letter critical of merit pay for teachers (“Test scores not the way to decide teacher pay,” November 6).

Ms. Boynton points out certain limitations of merit pay: A student may do well, but not necessarily because of the teacher in question; scores may be high because a given class is exceptionally bright; and testing would be further emphasized, in spite of the fact that it “already has too much value as part of the school program.”

I agree that there are difficulties (such as those mentioned) with any such program, but there are also positive reasons for merit pay.

First, most of us are willing to work a little harder if it means some increase in salary; conversely, most of us will slack off if doing so makes no difference.

Second, if a teacher is doing a poor job and fails to improve, merit pay is an ideal means of “suggesting” that the person look for some other line of work.

Are there teachers in the system who are doing a poor job? Of course. But it can be difficult to remove such a teacher under the present system.

Third, merit pay provides a means whereby a teacher can in fact improve his or her performance, since measurements are being made as to how effective he or she is. A little variation, coupled with feedback, is a common way of improving one’s skills in any field.

Thus, while implementing merit pay may present difficulties, there are also positive reasons for attempting to do so. Surely it makes sense to look at both sides of the issue.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

School decision misses the mark

Portland Press Herald

October 7, 2006

The Portland School Committee has spoken again (“Weighted class rank rejected by panel again,” Oct. 5).

How unfortunate. Recent actions by the committee are analogous to “ready, fire, aim,” or Ⓓ in the spirit of the season Ⓓ mimic those of the irresponsible hunter who shoots at the first movement in the forest, hoping to find a trophy buck, only to have shot an innocent.

Recent actions on school rankings infuriated enough of the community to provoke an outcry at a recent School Committee meeting.

The majority on the committee ignored those most directly in the line of fire. It is interesting to note that nearly all of the “majority” on the committee have no children in the system, little experience in education and seem obsessed with pushing their “least-common-denominator” agenda that seeks to reward the lowest achievements with the highest recognition.

Voters in Portland have a chance to send a message to non-incumbents on Election Day.

It is time to remove the irresponsible from positions of responsibility.

Mark Fernandez

Portland

The recent debate over weighted class rankings pits two values against each other. On the one hand, by giving more weight to more advanced courses, a weighted rank should more closely reflect what a student has learned.

On the other hand, as you report, some committee members hold that such a system is “unfair and discouraging to students who take general courses.” Further: “Some said they (weighted rankings) are elitist and racist policies because they view some students as better than others.”

In a recent editorial (“Reforming education will take open minds,” Oct. 1) you pointed out that opposition to merit pay on the part of Mark Gray (executive director of the Maine Education Association) is based on his stated belief that all teachers are giving 100 percent, and you responded: “It doesn’t pass the straight-face test to suggest that no teacher is better than the next.”

In a similar vein, let me suggest it doesn’t pass the straight-face test to suggest that no pupil is better than the next.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Am I missing something here?

Last time I checked, most schools want students to do their best and reach their full potential. Or at least, they say they do in their mission statements.

So forgive me if I scratched my head in confusion when I read that the Portland School Committee

decided to do away with its weighted class-ranking policy because it “gave more credit to students who took tougher courses.”

Umm, isn't that the point? To reward students for challenging themselves?

I'm sorry, but an A in a regular, non-honors class does not equal an A in an Advanced Placement (AP) class. It just doesn't.

AP classes are college-level courses; they're more difficult and more intense than regular high-school classes. And to get an A in college-level coursework while still in high school is pretty darn good.

But, hey, why should I care? I don't even go to Portland schools.

I'll tell you why: I am one of those “smart kids,” the ones who supposedly shouldn't receive extra GPA points for taking one AP course last year and two this year, for taking all honors classes and for getting straight A's every single year.

I wouldn't be opposed to the committee's decision if it had legitimate reasons for wanting to change the class-rank policy, and if it actually had an alternative policy to put in place.

Students who do well and push themselves to succeed deserve recognition. End of story.

Shannon Picuch
Student, Bonny Eagle High School
Buxton

In response to Kelley Bouchard's article, “Schools rethink ranking, tracking” (September 17), I am concerned about the decision to abolish tracking.

Teachers' voices should be sought out and listened to when important decisions are made that directly affect our students.

We are not “pigeonholing” students at the high-school level. It is insulting to imply that teachers do not push students to achieve their best at all levels.

Why does the Portland School Committee wish to make everyone the same? Being different makes our community interesting and special.

Why do we expect our children to excel equally? We as adults specialize. Everyone learns differently. They learn at different levels. It's a fact of life.

Our role at the high school is to prepare our students for life & make them good citizens, help them realize their dreams. They do not have the same dreams. Students choose their class level and can change it as they feel the need. They need to take ownership of their education.

I love Portland High's students. I don't know if the general public appreciates how many different human beings we have in this school & different in every possible way. It's wonderful.

If the committee truly wants to provide equal opportunities for all students, bring back Safe and Smart. Give us money for after-school tutoring. Get us more computers. We do amazing work with the little we have.

We do not need to abolish course levels.

We need money and support for programs we offer.

Allison Villam
Teacher, Portland High School

Motivate students with joy of learning

Portland Press Herald

August 28, 2006

I applaud the efforts Scott Feldmann's law firm is making to motivate young math students ("To keep kids in class, stress the cash connection," August 20).

More of this kind of civic-minded activism would be most welcome in Maine.

But if tangible incentives are the best we can do, we should not expect much education to result. No doubt cash awards can make a difference; if nothing else, they show somebody cares enough to put some money in.

But the students offered those rewards live in an out-of-school world where math is valued about the way people value dentistry. Maybe regular visits are better than the alternative, but nobody I know likes them.

There's something different we can offer for math.

Joy.

Real, tears in your eyes, breath-catching exultation.

But most students will graduate from high school, college, or (sad to say) even some higher degrees, without knowing that - without ever meeting someone who has felt in their bones the power of an equation or a function to unlock an infinity.

Maybe an infinity we can use, perhaps to map out the insides of the insides of the stuff we are made of.

Or maybe one that speaks of stars so distant we will never see them.

Or maybe an infinity that is just beautiful.

If we really want students who can use math well, we could do a better job of showing them it isn't just about use.

[Writer's name apparently left out]

Portland

The Maine Department of Education thinks Maine students got a lot smarter and the electorate a lot dumber from last year to this.

This is how it explains double-digit test increases in one year over a large population of Maine students.

In the article, "MEAs weren't made easier, officials say" (August 23), the department is still trying to advance rationales for this result.

Of, course, having completely rewritten the test is not considered the cause.

Duh! One doesn't have to be a professional test writer (we have some of those, right?) to have the elementary insight that the new test needs to be baselined. Against the old one.

Not against the department`s opinion. Not against some future federal test.

Do it now, even if you didn`t know enough to do it before - a head-to-head comparison of the new test against the old one using two random samples of students. Fifty to 100 students per group would be sufficient to establish - or reject - a statistically significant difference in average scores.

Until then, all the reasons advanced are just hot air. We`re not as dumb as you think.

Thomas M. Laurent
Camden

Your editorial, ``Will Maine`s assessment test still get an A for difficulty?`` (August 24), says a revision of the Maine Educational Achievement test was accompanied by an abrupt increase in student scores, leading to the question of cause and effect.

You point out: ``State education officials vigorously object to that idea, but it`s easy to see why the question is being raised.``

Surely this issue suggests there should be a strict separation between those who are responsible for the delivery of education to our students and those who evaluate how well our students are learning.

Or don`t we know better than to let the fox guard the henhouse?

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Save the Planet! Own Just One Home!

The New York Times

August 14, 2006

To the Editor:

Re "[Sinful Second Homes](#)" (column, August 8):

Bravo to John Tierney for pointing out the outrageous eco-sin of second-home ownership.

There's an aspect of the energy consumption involved in second-home ownership that has always bothered me far more than the cost of traveling to the home: even when empty week after week in the off season, second homes still have to be minimally heated in the winter (and sometimes even cooled in the summer, depending on the location).

Add in the additional cost of keeping your primary home minimally heated or cooled while you're away, and it's always been enough to deter any thought of second-home ownership for me — it's just irresponsibly expensive.

Lisa L. Foote

Minneapolis, August 8, 2006

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To the Editor:

John Tierney does well to examine the carbon footprints of celebrity environmentalists, though it's hard to tell if he's really concerned about reducing global warming or just debunking the cause — I hope it's the former.

But I, too, am disappointed by "do-gooders," from Oprah Winfrey to Bono, who choose lives of luxury when they could be setting real examples, more powerful than anything they preach, for millions of admirers.

Much of that Gandhi quote — "You must be the change you wish to see in the world" — comes down to living simply.

Douglas Goetsch

New York, August 8, 2006

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To the Editor:

I'm inviting John Tierney to my seaside cottage so he can see that not all second homes are sinful.

This little cottage withstood the 1938 hurricane and has barely been modernized since. My friends and family (particularly the Russian ones — used to dachas, not McMansions) regard it as a small bit of heaven.

Mr. Tierney can take public transportation from Times Square to within two miles of the cottage.

As Mr. Tierney surely knows, one measures environmental impact in part by weighing costs and benefits of a proposed action.

Using that method, I save energy when I'm at the cottage. The wind off Buzzards Bay cools the air; the water (only feet away) cools Maine

If Mr. Tierney revisits in five years, he may have the pleasure of looking out on the 400-foot-tall propellers from the Buzzards Bay wind farm.

Jeanne Van Orman
Arlington, Mass., August 8, 2006

The writer serves on the Fairhaven, Mass., Conservation Commission.

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To the Editor:

John Tierney takes those who own second homes to task because of the increase in carbon dioxide associated with such possessions. He [says](#) that “in all the years I’ve been reading lists of energy-saving tips, I’ve never noticed, ‘Sell second home’”

My own favorite never-noticed energy-saving tip: “Have fewer children.”

Or is this tip a little too inconvenient?

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Me., August 8, 2006

Job fair's aim unfair by focusing on minorities

Portland Press Herald

May 11, 2006

You report (“Job fair aims to keep minority graduates in state,” April 29) that students and college graduates “made their way around the NAACP Portland Branch’s college and job fair, part of its annual Celebration of Excellence in Education . . . For several years, the NAACP has gone out of its way to recognize as many of Maine’s minority college graduates as possible.”

Given that we are continuously told that we should not discriminate on the basis of race, I find it more than a little difficult to understand how any organization that treats people of one race differently from those of any other race can still be operating, here and now, in the state of Maine.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Hunger safety net begins at home

The Boston Globe

April 27, 2006

CATHERINE D'AMATO, president and CEO of The Greater Boston Food Bank, argues that more funds should be allocated to fighting hunger in Massachusetts (["Protecting our hunger safety net,"](#) op-ed, April 24).

She points out that roughly a third of those who are hungry are children, and continues: "Hunger and malnutrition have long-lasting, damaging effects on the health and development of children. . . . We as a society have an obligation to nourish them to ensure they grow up to become healthy, fully contributing members of our communities."

I would be a lot more sympathetic if she had written that those who choose to become parents have an obligation to make sure they can nourish their own children, ensuring they grow up to become healthy, fully contributing members of our communities.

Or is the very concept of individual responsibility now completely obsolete?

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Consider Other Behavior for Health-insurance Costs

Portland Press Herald

February 28, 2006

You argue that smokers should pay more for health insurance for two reasons: Smoking is an example of voluntary behavior; and smoking results in costs that impact others, including employers (“Smokers ought to pay more to get their health insured,” Feb. 20).

If one accepts your premises (which I do), why not examine all cases of voluntary behavior for which others pay?

I can think of a number of examples: eating more food than is healthy; eating the wrong foods; drinking to excess; exercising less than is optimal; engaging in activities (such as skydiving) with a high risk of injury.

And the list goes on.

By only treating a particular example, as you do, the general case goes unnoticed.

Impartiality, if nothing else, demands that we look at the abstract class.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Peaks determined to vote on secession

Portland Press Herald

April 03, 2006

In your editorial, “Peaks Islanders need to make the case for secession” (March 27), you said Peaks Islanders must make their case for self-government.

They have, and they will do so again, but not at the city workshop today, as they cannot speak freely there.

At the March 25 hearing on Peaks, the secessionists showed that Peaks’ secession will not hurt Portland and will help Peaks maintain its unique community.

Although the state will make up some of the city’s “lost” tax receipts, the city has long been shortchanged by the state school funding formula, and Peaks’ secession will help rectify that imbalance.

Certainly, Peaks Islanders cannot afford to make up the state’s shortfall.

Peaks can contract services with the city and regionalize with other islands to avoid duplicating services and costs.

Twelve years ago, the islanders did not ask to secede; they asked only to be allowed to vote on secession.

After they were denied that right, the Legislature enacted a new law allowing the island an advisory vote on secession.

After that, Peaks will offer a fair settlement with Portland, but if Portland refuses, Peaks will mediate a settlement, go to the Legislature, and then return to the islanders for a binding vote after the financial details are known.

Under the law, Portland is not empowered to determine whether Peaks governs itself.

It's up to Peaks Islanders themselves.

The Maine Constitution gives them the "unalienable and inalienable" right to decide whether to change their government.

That right cannot be given away by the islanders, nor taken away by Portland.

Michael Richards

Peaks Island

You argue that Portland should allow Peaks Island to secede only if that move is of monetary benefit to Portland.

You conclude: "The fiscal impact to Portland should control the decision. If the city feels this is not in its financial interest to let Peaks Island go, then it shouldn't."

How would such a principle be applied in other cases?

For example, in the case of the American Revolution, would you have agreed with Great Britain that it should have retained control over the colonies, given that it was not in her financial interest to let them go?

Surely there are other principles deserving to be heard.

For example, if the taxes paid by Peaks Island residents largely benefit the residents of Portland proper, should not that fact enter into the equation?

I fail to see why the labor of one group of people should be expropriated for the benefit of any other group.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Don't Rely on Faith Alone to Maintain Our Culture

Portland Press Herald

January 13, 2006

M.D. Harmon argues that Europe, and possibly the United States, will eventually be taken over by an Islamic culture ("As doomsday scenarios go, Death by Demography is gripping," January 6).

He bases this conclusion on rates of immigration and reproduction, and the argument makes a lot of sense.

However, he goes on to state: "You can't have a future if you don't build one, and you can't contest an expansionist faith if you have none of your own."

He is, in other words, arguing that only faith will help us maintain our culture.

Contrast faith, which involves belief in the absence of empirical evidence, with scientific induction, which involves belief precisely because of empirical evidence.

Which of these two alternatives is more likely to lead to effective action?

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Would Religious Freedom Include Rules of Sharia?

Portland Press Herald

December 03, 2005

You argue that the St. Rose of Lima School was within its rights to fire a pregnant and unmarried woman because, as you put it, "To protect religious freedom, people of faith must be allowed to practice the tenets of their faith freely" ("Church within rights to fire pregnant, unwed teacher," December 1).

Given the rise of Islam in this country, you might want to consider some rather somber implications of your position with regard to sharia, the strict Islamic legal code.

Sharia rules specify flogging, amputation of hands and stoning to death for alcohol consumption, stealing and adultery, respectively.

In contrast to your position, I would argue that people of faith should be allowed to practice the tenets of their faith as long as those tenets do not contradict the secular laws of the society within which those people find themselves.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

I strongly disagree with your editorial about the young, unmarried woman teacher.

She made a mistake but took complete responsibility for it and handled it within the teachings of the Catholic faith.

For this she should be punished?

She is actually a wonderful example to the young women of faith, meaning she did not get an abortion or take a leave of absence (and lie about her condition).

One's faith should be a center of support for one's life.

After all, no one is perfect.

Again, the Catholic Church speaks out of both sides of its mouth.

The church will ignore the mistakes of men and even cover them up. It will put women out in public to be held up to a double standard, and you will support this.

This is this woman's career, and I don't feel that any employer should be able to discriminate.

Equality should be the standard, not the exception.

Remember, only women carry the evidence of premarital sex.

She is a brave woman, and I have the highest respect for her.

She did the right thing.

Nancy Sullivan

Rockport

Disabilities in the Age of Genetics

The New York Times

November 27, 2005

To the Editor:

“[The Problem With an Almost-Perfect Genetic World](#)” (Week in Review, November 20) discusses the concern that advances in prenatal screening for Down syndrome and other conditions will lead to a decrease of services and care for people born with disabilities.

But testing for Down syndrome during pregnancy and the accompanying expansion of choice should lessen the isolation of people with disabilities. The world is a much more welcoming place for children who are wanted.

With testing, families will be expecting these children to arrive as they are, they will have been given a head start in working through their concerns, and other people will come to understand that the children were wanted - chosen in spite of test results, even if the choice is different from what theirs would be.

Remove the part of the disability that conjures up fear of the unknown and uncontrollable, and you’ve removed a large part of what makes up prejudice.

“That could happen to us” becomes “I wonder what we would do?” And respect for difference and different choices replaces fear.

Suzanne Hoffman Levin

New York, November 20, 2005

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To the Editor:

As a socially conscious member of the medical community, I know that medical care is unequally distributed. As the sister of a disabled person, I know that the disabled must fight for equal treatment in society.

But these are problems we must fight at the level of social policy making, not by decrying genetic screening of the diseases themselves.

Diana Barnes-Brown

Honolulu, November 22, 2005

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To the Editor:

It was with an increasingly heavy heart that I read about yet another refinement in genetic testing. Twenty-four years ago we began an unexpected journey for which we had no preparation: our daughter, Sarah, was born with Down syndrome.

Then, as now, a genetic test could have forewarned us. What the test could not have revealed, however, was the person that Sarah eventually became. Her delight in life and extraordinary capacity for love

and forgiveness enrich the lives of those who know her.

Years ago a friend, sensing in Sarah an absence of the pretense that plagues so many “normal” people, described her as “a rose with the thorns removed.”

Tragically, a genetic test may lead one to find thorns with no hope of experiencing the rose.

Dan Raessler

Lynchburg, Va., November 20, 2005

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To the Editor:

Because Americans have the right to make their own choices, every mother has the right to decide if she can take on the responsibilities of having a disabled child.

We should put our energy into finding cures for the disabilities, instead of debating a personal choice of abortion. I know that if I became pregnant, I would want the best of both worlds, to be able to have a child and to not worry about his having a disability.

Heidi Dreyfuss

Bloomfield Hills, Mich.

November 20, 2005

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To the Editor:

Genetic testing may mean there will be fewer people with certain disabilities in the future, which leads some with such problems to worry that people like them might have a more difficult time in the future.

Should I ever find myself with a disability, I certainly hope I won't wish the condition on others, just to make my own life a little easier.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Me.

November 20, 2005

Colby Could Tweak Plan for Alcohol Offenses

Portland Press Herald

November 12, 2005

In "Colby testing point system for students' alcohol offenses" (November 2), you report that Colby College plans a test program involving disciplinary points for students involved in drinking.

Most of the program makes sense to me, but there is one aspect I would change: Four points would be earned for participating in drinking that results in a visit to the emergency room.

This would mean that any student whose activity resulted in the need to visit the ER would be placed in a bind: Pay the visit and accrue the points, or risk not going to the ER and avoid the points.

Surely Colby can come up with a better contingency than that.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Grade Deflation

The New York Times

September 26, 2005

To the Editor:

Re "[Students Receive Fewer A's, and Princeton Calls It Progress](#)" (news article, September 20):

I suppose it should be gratifying to find that Princeton University has addressed grade inflation by cutting the number of A's given in undergraduate courses to 41 percent last year from 46 percent the previous year.

On the other hand, think how much more satisfying it would have been to see, rather than a decrease in the number of A's, an increase in the number of those who really deserved that grade.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Me.
September 20, 2005

On Deterring Red-light Runners

Portland Press Herald

August 10, 2005

Your editorial July 24 about cameras and running red lights misses the point completely.

Of course, the camera setups “caught lots of violators.”

All one has to do is sit at any light-controlled intersection and watch for 10 minutes, and you can verify the violations.

But think about what is going on. The problem is a lot larger than anyone likes to admit. Remember that driving is not a right; it is a privilege, and with your license comes the obligation and responsibility to obey the laws governing the use of our highways.

It would be nice if we could afford all the police that would be needed to enforce our traffic laws. Let's face facts, running red lights, stop signs and speeding is so endemic in our culture that police cannot solve the problem.

Let us use our police to work on issues that really need their attention and leave the inexpensive alternative of cameras to manage the simple violations of law.

Cameras can be permanent or temporary in any given location, and the ticketing is fast and simple and hard to dispute.

Europe uses both intersection and speeding camera systems and they work very well.

In Finland, the penalty for speeding is 10 percent of your annual income. Not many speeders there. The income would go a long way to balance the town and state budgets.

Whose civil rights are being violated anyway?

Now it is the people who obey the law and have to look both ways when the light turns green.

Let's work together to improve safety on our highways.

Fred Sprague
Cape Elizabeth

You argue that police officers should stop people who run red lights, not cameras.

Part of your argument rests on the fact that a camera does not deter crime, while an officer with flashing blue lights does.

However, in dealing with three teenagers who tortured and killed a dog in Presque Isle, you earlier wrote that the fact they cannot be charged as adults “is appropriate for their case.”

“If they committed this heinous crime as charged, these boys are extremely troubled and need the kind of help that only the juvenile court system is designed to provide.”

In other words, teenagers who torture a dog should be helped, not punished.

I have to wonder why you argue that deterrence is appropriate for runners of red lights but not for teenage torturers of a dog.

Is Torturing an Animal Somehow of less Importance in Your Calculus of Values?

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Fuss over Dead Llama Photo Overdone, Bemuses Mainer

Portland Press Herald

June 04, 2005

I was bemused by all the attention paid to the tempest in a teapot regarding the killing of a llama (“Showing of photos of dead llama leads to school apology,” May 6).

The Carrabec Community School principal apologized for showing a photo of a dead llama to the students, the state police believe the investigation may be compromised, and one young man “was taken into the office and questioned because he didn’t show the correct response to the photos.”

Feel free to investigate my whereabouts during the crime if I don’t show the correct response to the story.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine

Are Our High Schools Obsolete?

The New York Times

May 2, 2005

To the Editor:

Re “[What, Me Worry?](#),” “ by Thomas L. Friedman (column, April 29): Mr. Friedman and Bill Gates are profoundly right. Our high school curriculum is substandard for the 21st century.

Not long ago in a high school in North Miami, some parents of gifted kids complained to my son, a science teacher, that the homework is too difficult. My son replied, “I want them to be able to compete with future scientists in Korea and China.” There were no further complaints.

How to fix the problem? First, let’s agree that there is no Alabama or New York or Oregon math. There is one math, and its most advanced form should be taught.

The United States is today one employment entity, and it should have a unified curriculum. States may, if they wish, teach their particular area history, or humanities, but otherwise, ask Bill Gates and other leaders of the economy what is needed. This is the absolute minimum required to reach the high school level education of India and other future competitors.

Joseph Gottfried
West Palm Beach, Fla.
April 29, 2005

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To the Editor:

Bill Gates is right when he says our current high school system is obsolete, but it is obsolete only because of a faulty support system before it. Elementary and middle schools are not properly preparing students for the rigors of high school, which is subsequently forced to review nine years of fundamentals to prepare the students for college.

This leaves graduating high school students woefully unprepared for the real world, and far behind the students in other parts of the globe.

Where Mr. Gates is wrong, however, is the need for smaller schools. Smaller classrooms are important, but by having large schools with small classrooms, the school is able to attract better teachers, and with a lower overhead for one large building rather than multiple small ones, and less administration needed to run a larger school, the teachers can be paid more.

Neil E. Oney
Brooklyn, April 29, 2005

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To the Editor:

Here are three specific solutions to overcome Thomas L. Friedman’s depiction of President Bush’s second term as “The Great Waste of Time”:

Make computer literacy a graduation requirement from junior high school; tax all wages, not just those up to \$90,000, to resolve the Social Security problem; make Medicare eligibility progressive, as in taxes.

Frederic Wile
New York, April 29, 2005

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To the Editor:

Thomas L. Friedman [argues](#), following John Hagel III and John Seely Brown, that “comparative advantage today is moving faster than ever from structural factors, like natural resources, to how quickly a country builds its distinctive talents for innovation and entrepreneurship - the only sustainable edge.”

In other words, students and others need to be brought up to speed regarding technological advances, or we will be overtaken by other countries that are educating their citizens more rapidly than we are.

Having worked on computer-aided instruction for a number of years, I can attest to the typical response of educators when I suggest that my program might help students learn and retain knowledge more proficiently than the traditional approach: total silence.

It does not bode well.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Me.
April 29, 2005

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To the Editor:

I am aware of the deficiencies of many of our schools. But to make preparation for the labor market the chief goal of our schools is an antidemocratic idea. It is an important goal but must be placed alongside that of preparing our children for intelligent and responsible participation in our democracy.

Narrowing down their education to a limited, technical slice of our rich cultural heritage may possibly serve market forces but does not bode well for the future of our society.

Benjamin Solomon
Evanston, Ill., April 29, 2005

Testing Car Repairs

Daily Telegraph

April 7, 2005

Sir - You [report](#) (News, Apr 5) that the National Consumer Council has given the car repair industry a “final warning” over poor work in repairing automobiles, which might result in an Office of Fair Trading investigation.

This is typical of the ineffectual approaches usually taken by government: issue a warning and initiate an investigation.

Let me suggest that repair facilities be systematically tested and graded. Drop off a car with known problems, and give a report of how well those problems, and only those problems, were addressed. There is no alternative.

William Vaughan Chebeague, Maine

On Celebrating Christmas in Schools

Portland Press Herald

Friday, November 12, 2004

In response to your editorial comment about "Schools should not exclusively focus on Christmas," I strongly disagree with your position.

This country was founded on the principle of religious freedom by Christians being persecuted in Europe. Now that other people of religious backgrounds have emigrated here, the Press Herald recommends that the Christians who celebrate Christmas should say, "It's OK. Your holiday is more important than ours, and we'll put our celebration in the closet as not to offend you."

This is the exact attitude of people in the major cities on the West Coast. The Christmas holiday is referred to as "winter festival."

The word "Christmas" is only used in newspaper sale advertisements. Christmas is nonexistent on the West Coast, and your attitude is encouraging its disappearance here.

We should be respectful of all beliefs, but Christians founded this country and Christmas is an important Christian holiday. If non-Christians don't like it, let them move somewhere else.

Robert Olson
Kennebunk

In your editorial November 5, you argue that schools should not focus exclusively on Christmas because that might offend other students.

As you put it: "Parties that focus exclusively on Christmas, or assignments that call for a Christmas theme, probably are not respectful of all students, however. The message sent to non-Christians in these instances is one of exclusion, and that's not serving their needs."

In other words, children should not be excluded from activities because they do not share the beliefs those activities advance.

You then state: "Exploring religious themes does have a place in public education."

Oh, really? If it's not right to explore Christmas themes, why is it OK to explore religious themes? Or is it somehow permissible to exclude those of us who take a secular view of the world?

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

This letter is in response to Mark Peters' article concerning the celebration of Christmas in schools.

The holiday season is a time for families and for joy. And Christmas is just one part of this holiday season.

I believe that it is important for our children to understand and accept all aspects of diversity - and that includes religious observations.

While it is unacceptable for schools to celebrate it exclusively, the observation of Christmas in the school

environment can prove to be an important learning experience (in the same way that holidays such as Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Easter, etc., are).

In a world where we all have something to learn about honoring and appreciating diversity, how can any religion be overlooked?

Erin DeLong

Portland

Teaching with Laptops and MEAs

Portland Press Herald

August 24, 2004

I am grateful for the hint of skepticism in your front-page article of August 10 on computers in the classroom (“Laptop students still test the same”).

I am always amazed at the surprised reaction to the failure of computers in the classroom to generate improvement in the skills and knowledge of students.

The general human response to advances in technology (the television, the calculator, the personal computer, the Internet, PowerPoint, etc.) has been like primitive people’s reaction to photographs or lighters - Oooohhh! Look at that!

I know teachers who have been struck dumb by PowerPoint presentations that required perhaps five minutes of substantive research and even fewer minutes of critical thought.

The devices created (and sold to us) by IBM and Microsoft and their competitors are extraordinary tools, but they are only tools. They cannot replace the power contained in the human brain - power that must be nurtured and released through serious acquisition of linguistic and mathematical skills (among numerous other skills and bits of knowledge).

As we prepare students for real life, our intention should be to create independent young people, not people dependent on some device for basic functions. We don’t put people into wheelchairs, for example, unless we have to.

We must form people who first can function at a high level without technology and only second can use technology to suit their needs.

Steve Dalvet
Chairman
English Department
Cheverus High School
Portland

Regarding your article August 10 on laptops: The Maine taxpayers are being seduced so smoothly by the press and the computer companies that they don’t have a clue.

Will children learn? You betcha. There isn’t any seventh- or eighth-grader now who cannot get past the filter to a porn site in less than 60 seconds. There isn’t any seventh- or eighth-grader now who cannot answer e-mail or import and use plagiarized material from the Web while sitting in geography or math class.

And the teachers? They are learning, too. They are learning to be security guards, having to monitor usage instead of teaching.

Let’s face it. We are giving them a great toy, but it’s not improving their thought processes much. These kids need math and science, not the Web. It’s a tool meant for a more mature age.

Get a few good teachers away from the limelight, off the record and ask them how much time they have to spend policing the machines.

We have done the same thing with education that we do with anything else we cannot seem to fix. We throw more money at it. We don't need more computers for our kids. We need more classroom teachers and more parental involvement with homework and discipline issues.

Julie Leson
Windham

I was really disappointed to read that educated people are basing the success of the laptop program on the Maine Educational Assessment test scores.

Laptops do not make children smarter; they are a tool for our children to enhance their education and make them more competitive out in the work force.

When my 9-year-daughter caught a tadpole at 7 p.m. on a Sunday and wanted to know what to feed it, she found the answer in five minutes, using a computer and the Internet.

When the child in your article stated kids spend time downloading pictures and pasting them to create movies, isn't that what they do in the film industry?

Computer skill and literacy are absolute necessities in our world, regardless of our testing ability. Forty years ago, weren't a set of encyclopedias, a dictionary and a thesaurus considered necessary adjuncts? Didn't we still have a range of testing results?

Our duty as parents, educators and citizens is to provide our youth with modern tools to become functioning and productive members of our society. We shouldn't raise another generation to be afraid to use the computer.

Kirstie Ransdell
Bristol

You report ("Maine students' scores go up in math," August 6) that this year's Maine Educational Assessment test results showed an improvement in math scores, while other scores were essentially unchanged.

Susan Gendron, our education commissioner, is reported to be "encouraged" by the outcome in mathematics. One can go to a Maine state Web site that summarizes the results.

With respect to mathematics, according to that site, in grade 11, 24 percent of the students either exceeded or met the standards this past year; in grade eight it was 22 percent, and in grade four it was 32 percent.

The rest of the students either partially met or did not meet the standards.

On the assumption that "partially meeting" literally implies "does not meet," I, unlike Susan Gendron, am not encouraged. One can improve and, yet, as the results demonstrate, remain abysmally low.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Hope Island LNG: Bane or Boon?

Portland Press Herald

May 25, 2004

I was horrified that the Cumberland Town Council caved to a crowd of angry anti-development zealots by canceling the LNG referendum.

The opponents of progress in Harpswell moved their fight to Cumberland. The truth is that LNG opponents fear a free exchange of ideas and debate regarding LNG. For six months, I saw opponents of a liquefied natural gas terminal undertake every effort to stop a fair vote in Harpswell. They opposed opening of regular polling places and sought to cancel the referendum on multiple occasions.

The council's decision to thumb its nose at the majority by canceling the vote is a slap in the face to the thousands of Cumberland residents who did not express their preference regarding the future of their town. The council should have taken into account that only opponents mobilized for the meeting in an effort by opponents to once again pervert the democratic process. Shame on the council for allowing it to happen.

Tim Rich
Harpswell

YOU REPORT about fears of terrorism with respect to an LNG terminal in Casco Bay ("Terrorism threat roils debate on LNG safety," May 8). Some experts say that people living up to two miles from a fire could suffer burns, while Art Cleaves, who directs the Maine Emergency Management Agency, states that igniting such a fire "would be almost impossible to do."

An article in The New York Times on Oct. 26, 2003, discussing shoulder-fired missiles, stated: "... the equation is skewed in favor of anyone hoping to wreak havoc by launching a missile at an American plane: The weapons are relatively cheap (low-end models can be had for under \$10,000) and plentiful, while potential deterrents, such that exist, are few and incredibly expensive."

In the same article, Charles V. Peña, who directs defense policy studies at the Cato Institute, is quoted as saying: "Buildings are obviously targets too. Does the government become responsible for securing every building over, say, 10 stories tall?"

The only reasonable conclusion is that it is increasingly possible that terrorists could acquire a weapon that could ignite the LNG carried by a tanker or stored on shore. When Mr. Cleaves says that "would be almost impossible to do," he is obviously ignoring the growing global market for small but powerful weapons that can be carried by a single person.

William Vaughan, Jr.
Chebeague Island

HEY, I got an idea! Why didn't we think of this before? How about this?

Let's build the LNG terminal right in the middle of Casco Bay!

Yeah, that's the ticket!

Get a man right on it! Have it done by nightfall!

Sink a few barges for reefs, build in a few osprey nesting towers, put in picnic tables over by the tanks so we can attract kayakers and a climbing wall on the side of one of the tanks. Run a gondola over to Portland and provide tours to flatlanders.

Sounds like an economical, environmental winner to me! Besides, it's necessary for the town of Hope Island to have some industry to help shoulder the tax burden. Bless the citizens of Hope for their generosity in providing the land.

Keith Wegener
Falmouth

THANK YOU for your detailed reporting on the Hope Island situation and Casco Bay. Reviewing all the articles since May 6, the bottom line is that the town manager, William Shane, referred to a tax drop for Cumberland. He may want to further his knowledge by getting to know other areas that have oil tanks but are not benefitting from tax relief, such as South Portland. What you are told from the person waving the carrot will make things seem beneficial, but look down the long road.

Has Mr. Shane looked into the history, cost and burdens of safety for Boston with LNG tankers? Look at the past to see what the present and future will truly be.

Also, I remember the battle between gas and electric costs. Well, it has reversed at present. My electric bills are cheaper than the Northern Utilities gas. I am going back to an electric hot water heater. At least I will be safe and save money.

A person who loves Casco Bay,

Diane O'Reilly
Cliff Island

INSULT TO injury was my immediate reaction to the news that Hope Island was being considered as a legitimate place to rest an LNG tanker. That John Cacoulidis and state officials would even entertain the idea of an LNG terminal on Hope Island is frightening, if not criminal.

Hope Island, less than a decade ago, was a sacred place of extraordinary beauty and an important refuge for many birds, flora and fauna. In fact, a walkabout years ago revealed a great horned owl of epic proportions - I still wonder where that owl is today. The razing of woodlands and landscaping of meadows on Hope Island have left many on the bay deeply saddened. An LNG terminal will certainly be the death knoll for any lasting hope for Hope Island.

Thank you to Tess Nacelewicz for her important story ("Hope Island may be site for LNG terminal," May 6). May we all be concerned and hopefully united and active in our opposing this bad idea.

Ted Regan
Executive Director
Rippleffect, Inc.
Cow Island, Long Island

An 'A' at Princeton
The New York Times
April 30, 2004

To the Editor:

You report (Metro Briefing, April 27) that Princeton University will combat grade inflation by limiting the number of A's to be handed out. This solution assumes the existence of conservation of knowledge: there is only so much knowledge among a group of students, and if one student acquires more, it means, ipso facto, that another acquires less.

I would never give an A to any student of mine who proposed such a solution to the problem.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.
Chebeague Island, Me.

Curbing Violence in City Schools

The New York Times

January 7, 2004

To the Editor:

Re "[Police to Guard 12 City Schools Cited as Violent](#)" (front page, January 6):

I taught in a Brooklyn public school and experienced firsthand the daily disruptions by troubled students. Aside from the obvious problems facing public schools in New York City, school administrators' systematic denial and concealment of incidents is perhaps as serious a problem.

In an attempt to present their schools as safe, and therefore promote themselves as successful, some principals rarely suspend students or "unofficially" suspend students (by asking parents to keep their children home) so that their disruptions are not reported to the district.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's initiatives will never benefit these schools.

As frightening as it is that some schools need to take these measures, I feel worse for my former colleagues who are unprotected and work in buildings where the administrators value their reputations more than the safety of their staff and students.

PAMELA BROWN

Paris, January 6, 2004

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To the Editor:

"Police to Guard 12 City Schools Cited as Violent" (front page, January 6) appears to indicate that a lesser degree of violence is tolerated in other New York City middle and high schools, including assaults against teachers.

The mayor said that from now on, students who seriously injure others or are caught with weapons will be removed immediately. Is there a benchmark for how serious an injury against a staff member must be before students are removed?

It might be helpful for teachers to know how much physical harm they must endure to reach the passing grade of "serious."

KAREN LEON

West Hempstead, N.Y., January 6, 2004

The writer is a public school teacher.

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To the Editor:

It is wonderful that New York City is finally recognizing the problem of school violence, but the new draconian policy (front page, January 6) is disturbingly reactive and misguided.

The root cause of violence in the schools has always been the city's neglect of low-income students.

School-age kids are impressionable and respond directly to their environment, and an unsupervised, underfinanced, overcrowded system is a breeding ground for bullying and violence.

We need more teachers, more books, better role models and more people caring about students and nurturing their development, not a system that neglects and stigmatizes those most in need of guidance and support.

Spending money on the police because we didn't first spend the money to give kids the time and devotion they so badly need sells our kids short and bodes ill for the future of our society as a whole.

DAVID AZCUE

Brooklyn, January 6, 2004

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To the Editor:

You report (front page, January 6) that 150 police officers will be brought in to help with order in 12 of the most violent schools in New York City.

You then report that officials cautioned against labeling the 12 schools the city's most dangerous.

If they are not the most dangerous, which schools are, and why aren't police officers being sent there? And if they are the most dangerous, why the spin?

Is there something about acknowledging the existence of dangerous schools that some people find offensive?

Perhaps those officials are simply taking advice from Mark Twain, when he said: "Truth is the most valuable thing we have. Let us economize it."

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine, January 6, 2004

Temper responses to religion-based requests

Portland Press Herald

December 29, 2003

You have published an editorial dealing with a decision of the Maine Human Rights Commission, which held that basketball games should be played on Friday in spite of the fact that one student, Anthony Greenlaw, has religious reasons for not playing at that time (“Friday games shouldn’t change for one student,” December 12).

You call the decision “difficult” and say that, while “a commission investigator originally recommended in favor of the request, the commission overturned that decision after a public hearing.”

I find it a little difficult to understand why so much attention, time and effort (including your editorial) has been paid to one student who has religious scruples about playing on Friday night.

If we as a society have to respond to every complaint from each and every religious perspective, we will quickly find ourselves bogged down in internecine conflict from which there is no hope of escape.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL

The Boston Globe

July 3, 2003

YOU REPORT THAT VICE PRESIDENT DICK CHENEY'S VISIT FOR A FUND-RAISER RESULTED IN ROUTE 128 BEING CLOSED SO THAT HE AND HIS MOTORCADE COULD MOVE FORWARD UNIMPEDED.

On this centennial of George Orwell's birth, it is well worth remembering his incisive observation: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Cloning, With Hopes and Fears

The New York Times

January 27, 2003

To the Editor:

In "[How One Clone Leads to Another](#)" (Op-Ed, January 24), Leon R. Kass says "there is virtually no precedent in animal work that demonstrates the unique benefits of creating and exploiting cloned embryos." In 2002, my colleagues and I published a paper in Nature Biotechnology that clearly showed that cloning can be used to eliminate the problem of tissue rejection.

Our study provided direct evidence that cloned cells can be transplanted back into animals without being destroyed by the body's immune system.

In addition to creating heart "patches," we used cloning to generate miniature kidneys. Immunological studies confirmed that there was no rejection of the cloned tissues, whereas noncloned tissues were reduced to debris.

The ability to generate histocompatible cells using cloning techniques addresses one of the most important challenges in transplantation — the problem of rejection.

ROBERT LANZA, M.D.

Worcester, Mass.

January 24, 2003

The writer is medical director, Advanced Cell Technology.

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To the Editor:

I was disappointed that in opposing cloning, Leon R. Kass (Op-Ed, January 24) declined to say that with in vitro fertilization and sperm and egg shopping, we have already turned procreation into manufacturing. The eugenics revolution is well under way. Cloning will only intensify the process of industrialization of humanity.

JAMES BRAXTON

New Brunswick, N.J.,

January 24, 2003

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To the Editor:

Leon R. Kass, chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics, argues that opposition to cloning is practically unanimous in the United States ([Op-Ed](#), January 24).

There is no ethical reason to curtail cloning, just as there was, in the past, no ethical reason to curtail test-tube babies. In both cases it is simply the strangeness of the procedure that leads people to fear it, fear that is inflamed by writers like Dr. Kass.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.
Chebeague Island, Me.

January 24, 2003

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To the Editor:

Perhaps if cloning were referred to as asexual reproduction it would help to avoid some of the prejudices evoked by the word cloning. Both sexual and asexual reproduction are widespread in nature, and each is advantageous in certain situations, although sexual reproduction has the general advantage of producing new mixes of genes.

Leon R. Kass (Op-Ed, January 24) thinks that the central issue, and the primary reason to ban all human asexual reproduction, is that human sexual reproduction has a dignity that is threatened by asexual reproduction. He locates this dignity in the chance mixing of genes in sexual reproduction, which he supposes is threatened by the preservation of a genome in asexual reproduction.

But perhaps human dignity does not lie in subservience to chance and in trying to forbid the extension of human power over it, but in the development and wise use of such power.

WALTER WATSON

Setauket, N.Y.

January 24, 2003

Using drugs to save lives may backfire

Portland Press Herald

September 7, 2002

You point out that fire trucks in Portland are now equipped with naloxone, which can potentially save the life of an overdose victim (“Portland’s fire trucks add drug to stem rash of overdose deaths,” August 20).

While this may appear to be the humane thing to do, it would also make sense to evaluate the long-term consequences of such a program.

Everyone who takes drugs presumably evaluates the pros and cons of doing so. Making naloxone more available will have the effect of reducing the disadvantages of taking drugs, and so might possibly increase drug use (an effect termed “moral hazard” by economists).

For example, there is evidence that bicycle helmet use has increased the number of bicycle accidents, because people feel safer with a helmet, and so take more chances. If the same effect were to occur with naloxone, those who currently advocate its use may come to wish they had not.

William Vaughan, Jr.

Chebeague Island

Sleepy on Air Security

The New York Times

February 26, 2002

To the Editor:

You report that an airport security employee fell asleep, resulting in thousands of passengers having to be rescreened (“[Worker Naps, Flights Slow](#),” news item, Feb. 20).

Who will watch the watchers?

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island, Maine, Feb. 20, 2002

Critique of ‘Savage’ Reviewers Lauded

APS Observer

February, 2002

Bravo to Robert Sternberg for confronting savage reviewers [[“On Civility in Reviewing,”](#) Observer , January 2002]. I was fortunate to have a professor in graduate school, a highly respected researcher in clinical psychology, who shared with us some of the ugly reviews he received so as to raise our awareness that it is common practice in the field, and that we should not take it personally. This was helpful to my ego when I later received my own share of nasty reviews, but not as helpful to my research which was hard enough without being harassed by some anonymous know-it-all. I took my writing skills elsewhere and began freelancing. The editors, many of whom know little or nothing about psychology, know how to write. More importantly, they know how to provide helpful and meaningful feedback that encourages the continued work of the writers they value.

I would hope editors would be more proactive in sabotaging such reviews before those very reviews sabotage the scientific initiative of the authors. Savage reviewers can take some credit for further narrowing the pool of talented people who might contribute to this vast field.

Gina Mireault
Johnson State College

I commend Robert Sternberg for his comments regarding “On Civility in Reviewing” in the January 2002 issue of the Observer . Removing the shield of anonymity from reviewers might reduce the frequency of irresponsible, “savage reviews.” We know that anonymity increases the likelihood of aggression. This is especially true when responding to anonymous targets. Requiring that reviewers identify themselves would lessen the anonymity effect, and increase their sense of responsibility.

Terence W. Campbell
Sterling Heights, Michigan

Robert J. Sternberg [Observer, January 2002] described important potential consequences for authors, editorial reviewers, and the field of psychology when reviewers draft savage comments in response to a manuscript. As an author, editorial assistant for two separate scholarly journals, and an associate editor of quantitative research for another, I have witnessed my own share of savage reviews. Sternberg described an overview of this problem, but I believe that there are additional undesirable consequences that editorial reviewers should strongly consider before engaging in such savagery.

Although manuscripts are reviewed blindly, it is not uncommon for a reviewer to have a good guess as to who the author of the manuscript is (considering the references provided and the reviewer’s knowledge of the researchers associated with the particular area of research examined). However, editorial and ad hoc reviewers are reminded that it is probably easier for an author to make a good guess as to who may have reviewed his or her manuscript (considering the author’s knowledge of the researchers associated with the particular area of research examined, who are also listed on the journal’s editorial board). Not only may such scenarios contribute to developing animosity toward the chief editor or periodical, but also toward particular editorial board members that may or may not have reviewed the manuscript. Subsequently, such attitudes can contribute to the elitism associated with “prestigious” scientific journals.

As Sternberg encourages, some chief and associate editors do not send along to authors the savage sections of their manuscript’s reviews. The editors, however, do not forget the savagery. Savage reviewers may risk the chance to contribute further to the journal. Perhaps just as important, editorial assistants are also unlikely to erase from memory the repeatedly savage reviews returned from a reviewer.

Often, editorial assistants are students in the field that the periodical represents and are likely to “look up to” several of the board members. Thus, the savage self-presentation can impact the reviewer’s reputation from multiple sources.

Submitting a manuscript can be an intimidating experience for both the beginner and the more seasoned author. A purpose of the review process is to use the constructive criticism of other professionals to improve research. The savagery of the matter can often mislead authors, and cause them to revise portions of their manuscript that are unnecessary and retain portions in need of revision. Such confusion may cause a long tailspin of revisions and ultimately lead to scientific reports guided by savagery rather than solid scientific thought.

It is likely that the reviewer’s degree of perceived anonymity contributes to de-individuation in the review process. However, the potential professional consequences are clear, and most of all, they negatively impact the field. In addition to Sternberg’s reminder of the Golden Rule, another good rule of thumb for editorial reviewers may be to not write anything into their review comments that they would not be willing to personally communicate to the author.

- John V. Petrocelli
University of Georgia

A Contradiction in Civility?

In his “[On Civility in Reviewing](#)” [Observer , January, 2002] Robert Sternberg takes to task people who write overly critical reviews of submitted papers and grant proposals. He says, for example, that such reviews violate a fundamental ethical rule, acting toward others as we would have them act toward us.

It only makes sense to assume that Sternberg means his comments to apply to published work as well. This led me to take a second look at his [review](#) of Herrnstein and Murray’s *The Bell Curve* (Psychological Science, 1995, 6: 257-261). In that work, Sternberg comes to a number of rather strong conclusions. For example, he states that Herrnstein and Murray are factually incorrect in asserting that the existence of a general factor in intelligence is beyond significant technical dispute, that they are incorrect in what they say people mean by ‘intelligent’ in everyday speech, that they are incorrect when they say no one enforces sorting by means of cognitive abilities, that they are incorrect in terms predicting job performance by intelligence tests, and that they are incorrect with regard to the modifiability of intelligence.

In fact, there is absolutely nothing that Sternberg says about *The Bell Curve* that is in any way positive. I ask the reader to consider how this lines up with this statement in his Civility column: “Really, it is the rare article or grant proposal that has no fundamental positive value at all.” I would add: It is the rare author who so explicitly contradicts himself.

- William Vaughan, Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Editor’s Note: The writer indicates that he worked with Richard Herrnstein for a number of years.

Sternberg’s Response

I appreciate Dr. Vaughan’s taking the time to write a thoughtful reply to my column. I have a few responses to his comments.

First, I stand by what I said in the review of Herrnstein and Murray's book, *The Bell Curve*. What I thought was incorrect then, I think is incorrect now. Indeed, I think the evidence for its being incorrect is stronger today than it was then.

Second, I believed then, and I believe now, that *The Bell Curve* was an unusual work. First, it was a trade book (i.e., a book for a lay audience), not an article or grant proposal. So unfortunately, Vaughan seems to have misrepresented my article, surprisingly, even the portion he quoted himself, which says nothing of trade books. I may well have contradicted myself in my career, but not in this instance.

The difference between a trade book, on the one hand, and a scholarly article or grant proposal, on the other, is not trivial. Scholarly articles and grant proposals are subject to peer review and are written with scientific peer review in mind; in contrast, trade books typically are not peer reviewed, or if they are, it is usually more from a marketing standpoint than from a technical standpoint. Trade books are often purposely inflammatory to increase media interest and sales; scholarly works rarely are, although of course there are exceptions. So I do not apply the same standards to trade books that I apply to scholarly articles. Some of them are trash, and the publishers know it, but do not care, because trash can sell. For many commercial publishers, the bottom line (not scholarly quality) is pretty much all that matters.

That said, I do not think the Herrnstein and Murray book was trash. But I do think it was inflammatory and designed to lead lay readers to certain conclusions that, often, were not explicitly stated, but rather that were strongly implied, for example, regarding a genetic basis for racial differences (which I do not believe is an empirically supported view).

Third, I do believe now, as I believed then, that there is value in bringing difficult issues out in the open and encouraging intellectual debate. *The Bell Curve* served this purpose. But I believe it did it in a way that was unfortunate, because whereas some professionals would realize the limited conclusions that could be drawn from its data, most lay readers would not, and would be likely to make inferences that were not warranted by the data. Moreover, lay readers might not be as likely as scientists to realize that the policy recommendations at the end of the book did not follow from and, indeed, had nothing to do with the data.

Finally, I believe that Herrnstein was a brilliant scientist. I knew him and had great respect for much of his work. But I believe that his work on intelligence was a decidedly mixed bag. His collaborative work on Project Intelligence in Venezuela was brilliant and ground-breaking and showed that intellectual skills could indeed be taught. But I believe that his ideological views led him, in *The Bell Curve*, in a direction inconsistent with his own positive data and with the data of others as well. Of course, that is only my view, and no one can ask him, because he is deceased. If there is a lesson in all of this, it is that even the best scientists must be careful not to let their ideology hold sway over their science, and that lesson applies every bit as much to me as to anyone else.

Christmas passes, school issues don't

Portland Press Herald

Dec 27, 2001

In your article dealing with the elimination of Christmas decorations in schools ("SAD 75 holiday policy strives to be inclusive," Dec 16), you say this results from "a new policy designed to acknowledge the growing diversity of students in the district and their varied religions, cultures and traditions."

That may very well be the case, but one can ask: How far should this go?

Do we stop celebrating New Year's Day because that's part of our culture? Valentine's day? Presidents' Day? Easter? Memorial Day? The Fourth of July? Labor Day? Thanksgiving? Halloween?

Even though I'm an atheist, I consider Christmas to be part of the culture in which I grew up and see nothing wrong with observing it.

If someone wishes to join this culture, let them do so. But there's no reason we should eliminate our own cultural practices because someone comes here and, rather than joining this culture, wishes to hold onto their own.

William Vaughan, Jr.
Chebeague Island

PREFERENCES RE: APPLES

Harvard Magazine

November-December 2001

You fail to mention a significant step in the development of [Laibson's model](#). The behavioral research leading to it was primarily done by George Ainslie, who worked in Richard Herrnstein's pigeon lab at Harvard; Howard Rachlin, who received his doctorate under Herrnstein; and Herrnstein himself. Let me add, on this seventh anniversary of his death, that the popular press associates Herrnstein only with his work on IQ, but he contributed to numerous other areas within the science of psychology, including the history of psychology, the psychology of crime, concept formation, and choice.

William Vaughan Jr., Ph.D. '76

Chebeague Island, Maine

Standardized Tests in Infancy

Portland Press Herald

Friday, June 8, 2001

MAINE VOICES: William Vaughan Jr.

The use of standardized testing has raised a hue and cry throughout the country.

Any number of objections have been taken up against the practice: "Such testing does not test the whole person. Students spend too much time preparing for the test, and teachers teach to the test. Classes that have no bearing on test results may get short shrift. Students focus on memorization, to the detriment of real learning. Students never learn exactly which answers they gave were right or wrong."

The conclusion usually reached is that such testing should be dropped, in favor of evaluations in the form of portfolios, teacher evaluations and the like. However, there is a positive side to the argument that should not be ignored:

Students in the United States often score below those from other countries in a number of subjects, such as science and math. This suggests there is a problem, but does not implicate any particular solution.

Standardized testing allows students to be tested objectively and efficiently.

Such testing institutes a common currency. If only local standards are employed, there is no way to compare how students from different areas are doing.

In addition to testing the student, such testing tests the teachers. The only way to know how well a teacher is doing is to know how well his or her students are doing in terms of becoming better educated. A teacher may be amusing, inspiring, and friendly, but all that counts in the end is whether his or her students are better educated.

Suppose you have a child going to an elementary school, high school, college, or university. You want your child to get the best education possible, and so you call the school and ask which teachers do well at teaching. What answer are you likely to get?

Whatever it is, it won't be what you're looking for. No one knows how much teachers are accomplishing, and even if they had some idea, no one would say. Consumer Reports can tell you which brand of car is best overall, but no school can say which of their teachers is best.

Might this have some relevance to our poor educational accomplishments? Of course. If the job of a teacher is to instill an education, at the very least we need to know how good a job he or she is doing. In all probability it would make sense to pay teachers in proportion to how well they are doing their job.

The fact that merit pay in education is a contentious issue is further evidence of a problem. In practically any profession apart from education, what you earn reflects how well you do the job. In education we know next to nothing about what is being learned by students, nor do we know how long they will retain it.

None of this is to say that the current form taken by standardized tests is optimal. Indeed, the current state of testing may be comparable to the Wright brothers' original plane when placed alongside a 747.

Nevertheless, throwing out the infant is no solution. We need a common currency in evaluating what students are accomplishing that is efficient and objective, and we need to know what teachers are

accomplishing. Otherwise we neither know where we are nor whether progress is being made.

The use of computers should allow us to design better ways of both testing and teaching. At present we are largely focusing on using computers for Internet access, a move that is little more than hype.

I believe we should be discovering precisely what it is we want students to be able to do, and then we should find ways of bringing that about. Today's students are tomorrow's citizens, and we need to ensure they are well-educated citizens.

About the author

William Vaughan, Jr. (wvaughan@nlis.net) owns Casco Courseware, LLC, on Chebeague Island, which will soon be marketing a computer program that helps students and others learn information in an efficient manner.

- Special to the Press Herald

On Marriage and Who Should Marry

Portland Press Herald

June 7, 2001

According to M.D. Harmon, “You don’t have to be religious to value marriage, because modern social science provides plenty of solid evidence of its importance” (“As incentives for living together grow, the future gets darker,” May 28).

Mr. Harmon then goes on to cite evidence that people who marry live longer, are healthier, and have lower rates of both alcoholism and domestic violence than unmarried people.

One of the first concepts I cover in my introductory psychology courses at the University of Southern Maine is that, given a correlation between two variables, you cannot infer a causal relation between them.

If you observe a correlation between being tall and driving faster, you cannot infer that being tall makes people drive faster, nor that driving faster makes people tall.

Unfortunately, the entire force of Harmon’s argument relies on the assumption that there is a causal relation between being married and the other variables he discusses. For example, marriage may make people healthier (as he infers), but, alternatively, healthier people may be more likely to marry (a possibility he fails to discuss). Or some third variable may have a causal influence on both getting married and health.

Isn’t it time we injected a little science into our suggestions regarding social policy?

William Vaughan, Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Human Genome Project Evidence of Evolution

Portland Press Herald

March 16, 2001

I find it necessary to object to a recent letter by Dr. Delvyn Case, who asserts that the results of the human genome project “speak of a designer God.”

They do no such thing.

The fact that humans and other organisms share genes in common speaks of common descent, one of the central tenants [tenets] of Darwin’s theory of evolution. The fact that plants and animals share the same basic organization of DNA is further evidence of this. If life on earth had been created by a designer God, there would be no reason to expect such a correspondence between organisms as disparate as plants and animals.

William Vaughan, Jr.
Chebeague Island, Maine

Death of man in park not two officers' fault

Portland Press Herald

December 28, 2000

Bill Nemitz argues that officers John Virginio and John Morin were wrong in not calling Medcu when they found David Town, a street person, passed out in Deering Oaks several months ago ("Even outcasts have a right to protection," Dec 20).

He argues that if Town had been better dressed, for example, he would have been given more attention, and so it is right that Virginio and Morin lost their jobs.

The basic argument being made by Nemitz is that society should treat all of us the same, regardless of what we contribute to society.

There is, however, another perspective, according to which society should bestow more benefits on those who in turn benefit society.

For example, the president of the United States receives the finest and most immediate medical attention, far ahead of the common man. Do we expect him or her to wait in line at the local HMO?

And at the other end of the spectrum, why should we as a society tax productive individuals and in turn spend that money on people who behave in self-destructive ways and are of little or no benefit to society?

Virginio and Morin were doing little more than using common sense when they decided to let David Town sleep it off.

William Vaughan, Jr.
Chebeague Island

Fishy Deal

Electronic Telegraph

December 14, 2000

From: William Vaughan Jr

Re: Fishy deal

Date: 14 December 2000

SIR - I find it ironic that the World Wide Fund for Nature feels it necessary to pay fishermen not to go after depleted stocks of fish [[Payments 'only way to secure cod stocks'](#), 13 December 2000].

Is it not true that these same fishermen are the ones who created the problem in the first place?
What, exactly, is the moral of this?

A Right Way to Teach?

The New York Times

November 18, 2000

To the Editor:

Your laudatory article describing James Maas's course in psychology at Cornell University ([news article](#), Nov. 17) precisely illustrates one of the major problems faced by all educators: Should one entertain, or should one ensure that one's students learn the material?

Professors' teaching abilities are predominantly judged by means of student evaluations, but students seldom have a good idea of how much they have learned, or a good idea of how long they will retain it.

The fact that Dr. Maas evaluates his students by means of three multiple-choice exams a semester should serve as a red flag. Life is not a multiple-choice exam; one has to produce answers without prompts. Do students go to college to be amused while there, or are they preparing for life in the real world?

WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.

Chebeague Island, Me., Nov. 17, 2000

The writer teaches psychology at the University of Southern Maine.

Laughing and Learning

The New York Times

November 25, 2000

To the Editor:

A Nov. 18 [letter](#) questions the methods of James Maas, a psychology professor at Cornell University, suggesting that educating and entertaining are opposites. As one of many students in Professor Maas's Psychology 101 course 24 years ago, I know that the answer is clear to me.

I remember and apply aspects of his amusing lectures all the time. His tests may not have been difficult, but his delivery kept my interest and attention more than any fear of difficult essay tests. Granted, it was more Las Vegas than Ithaca, but education is not what one remembers for a test but what one remembers for life.

The letter asks whether students go to college to be amused or to be prepared for life. These goals aren't mutually exclusive, and Professor Maas's students accomplish both.

SCOTT H. GREENFIELD

New York, Nov. 18, 2000

Need for Honor Roll Debated

Portland Press Herald

May 15, 2000

The suggestion by Cape Elizabeth Middle School Principal Nancy Hutton that the school's honor roll be dropped (May 6) continues the trend toward mediocrity in education.

Ms. Hutton believes the honor roll puts "intense pressure on the students" and that "lost in all these realities is the celebration of learning."

Ms. Hutton's proposal follows other ideas, such as the elimination of class rankings, the elimination of sports championships and the rescheduling of the school day to allow students to sleep later. Does any of this prepare students for the realities of the real world?

In the same edition of the Press Herald that reported this story, the headline on Ann Landers' column read "Ten rules children won't learn in school." Some were especially noteworthy. Educators, take heed.

Life is not fair. Get used to it.

The real world won't care as much about your self-esteem as your school does. This may come as a shock.

If you think your teacher is tough, wait until you get a boss.

Life is not divided into semesters. And you don't get summers off. You are expected to show up for work every day for eight hours.

Your school may be "outcome-based" but life isn't. In some schools, you're given as many chances as you want to get the answer right. Standards are set low enough so nearly everyone can meet them. This of course, bears not the slightest resemblance to anything in real life.

Wayne W. Duffett
Portland

THOUGHTS prompted by the honor roll debate in Cape Elizabeth, but not limited to Cape parents:

To all parents, for your children's well-being, please learn to separate your egos from your children.

As the mother of two high school and two middle school children, I know this can involve continuous self-restraint but it must be done. Each time their educational experience is watered-down by your meddling, their future as an independent person suffers, not yours.

Allow your children to be the best they can be, not the best you want them to be.

I doubt these future adults will have colleagues or bosses who would put up with your meddling. Let go of your egos now, before your children lose their opportunity to succeed on their own strengths, whatever those strengths may be.

Annie Michel
Yarmouth

MOST OF the reasons given for possibly doing away with the honor roll at the Cape Elizabeth Middle

School point directly to the fact that students are highly motivated to get that recognition.

For example, Principal Nancy Hutton mentions that the system puts pressure on some students to maintain high grades, some parents try to get teachers to change grades and some students cheat.

While eliminating the motivation is one possible approach, another would involve abolishing, so far as possible, any means of getting a high grade apart from learning the material.

No parent should be able to approach a teacher about changing a grade without negative consequences, and any student caught cheating should, at the very least, flunk that class. Keep offering carrots, but make sure no one steals them.

William Vaughan, Jr.
Chebeague Island

Question about cost of school bomb threats

Portland Press Herald

April 24, 2000

Asking parents of children who make bomb threats pay for financial losses (“School district wants to make parents pay for kids’ threats,” April 7) only goes part of the way toward making restitution. What about the loss of learning due to disruption and/or lost time in class? Who will cover that cost?

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Needed in 2000: Lincoln-Douglas

The New York Times

March 14, 2000

Related Articles J. Crew vs. Banana Republic (March 11, 2000) Gore and Bush Set for a Fiery Race That Starts Now (March 9, 2000)

To the Editor:

Re "[Gore and Bush Set for a Fiery Race That Starts Now](#)" (front page, March 9): To reduce the presidential campaign's intensity level, America needs a series of debates between Al Gore and George W. Bush.

Historians regard the series of debates between Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln during the 1858 Illinois state election as among the most significant statements in American political history.

In 1858, slavery and states' rights were the forces that divided the nation. In 2000, Americans are riven by problems of gun control, a patient's bill of rights, campaign financing, environmental regulation, poverty, taxes, abortion, public education, racial unity and a host of other issues.

A series of Bush-Gore debates would afford millions of American voters the opportunity to make a more enlightened choice of the man who will next occupy the White House.

MURRAY EISENSTADT

Brooklyn, March 10, 2000

To the Editor:

Frank Rich points out that those of us voting in the November election don't really have a choice, given the similarity between the candidates ([column](#), March 11).

Perhaps this country needs a different approach to choosing who will head the government.

In business and education, for example, a job description is generated, and then someone who best fits the qualities needed is hired.

And, if necessary, subsequently fired.

Rather than voting for a particular person, perhaps we should be voting for particular values, which in turn would go toward making up a job description of someone who actually reflects what we as a nation desire.

William Vaughan, Jr

Chebeague Island, Maine March 11, 2000

Skewed justice system

Portland Press Herald

February 8, 2000

Two headlines in the Feb. 4 paper point to an irrational side of our criminal justice system. In “Johnson gets two years for strangling her infant,” we learn that Jody Johnson strangled her 2- day-old infant in 1997 and has now received a sentence of two years in prison and six years of probation.

In “Two men get 10 years for child porn,” we learn that Michael Weeks and Dale Martin traded pictures of child pornography and will each be sentenced to 10 years in prison.

The clear implication is that some of us find it less reprehensible to cause a child’s death than to disseminate pictures of child pornography. I entirely disagree with that system of values.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Organ Transplants: A Doctor's Dilemma

The New York Times

January 3, 2000

To the Editor:

The controversy over national transplant policy illustrates a subtle paradox about the ethics of transplant medicine ("Iowa Turf War Over Transplants Mirrors Feuds Across the Nation," front page, December 29).

While the ethic of other doctors is to do their utmost to aid the patient in front of them, transplant surgeons must sometimes deny their services to patients they confront. Since transplant surgeons look for the optimal use of the scarce resource (the transplantable organ), they often tell patients whom they might help that others would be better served.

In a sense, the transplant doctor's duty devolves to the organ and not to the patient. This triage mentality, while perhaps unavoidable, runs counter to the classic codes of medical ethics.

CORY FRANKLIN, M.D. Wilmette, Ill., December 29, 1999

The writer is a professor of medicine and medical ethics at Cook County Hospital.

To the Editor:

The federal government hopes to give Donna E. Shalala, the secretary of health and human services, broad power over where donated organs, like livers, should go (front page, December 29).

I find it rather mystifying that Dr. Shalala, rather than those who donate their organs, will have the authority to say what happens to those organs. Surely this has not a little to do with the fact that far fewer organs are donated than are needed.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.

Chebeague Island, Me., Dec. 29, 1999

An equitable solution for property taxes

Portland Press Herald

November 19, 1999

Your article, "Property prices -- and taxes -- explode in Maine's wild market," makes clear that property taxes are rising at least in part because people from out of state are purchasing waterfront property, often for record prices.

This has the effect of making it difficult for some people living in Maine year-round to afford their taxes.

There is an entirely equitable solution. Suppose X, who lives out of state, purchases property for a high price and thereby causes the taxes on surrounding property to rise.

Let X (who has caused the increase) pay for that increase, thereby letting Y (who lives in Maine year-round) continue to afford housing in which he or she has lived all along.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Diversity education at USM questioned

Portland Press Herald

January 7, 1999

I have always viewed racism as the position that one should be treated better or worse, at least in part, because of one's race.

Given this, it seems contradictory for University of Southern Maine to try to educate "faculty, staff and students about racism . . ." and then to consider creating "a multicultural center for students, a place where minority students could gather socially . . ." ("USM taking steps to boost diversity," Portland Press Herald, Dec. 30)."

Is this not a form of racism? USM will also increase "efforts to recruit minority students and employees." Is not preferential admission or hiring based on race a case of racism?

Perhaps the attempt to educate faculty, staff and students about racism will involve informing them that racism is really not so bad.

William Vaughan, Jr.
Chebeague Island

Education is answer to earning a living

Portland Press Herald

November 16, 1998

A recent article ("New tools for easing poverty explored," Oct. 28) describes individual development accounts in which money saved by individuals is matched on a 1-to-1 or a 2-to-1 basis.

Unfortunately, that program, like most such attempts, sets up rewards for both succeeding and for failing. In particular, it rewards failure by providing the matching funds if a person's income is at or below 200 percent of the poverty line. Anyone earning around that amount, whether below or above the cutoff, is then handsomely rewarded for remaining below the line.

This is not to say there is no solution to poverty, but it lies in a different direction. Public education, from the first grade through adult education, is perhaps the only way to provide people with the resources they need to make a living without simultaneously rewarding them for failure.

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Local control crucial for library Internet access

Portland Press Herald

March 19, 1998

Thank you, Bill Nemitz, for speaking up for local control over Internet access at public libraries. The federal government first taxes us and then gives us back some of that money, with the proviso we behave according to its standards. Whose country is this, anyway?

William Vaughan Jr.

Chebeague Island

Living, dying are personal decisions

Portland Press Herald

February 20, 1998

In the land of the free and home of the brave, it is always surprising to find there are people who feel the need to tell the rest of us how to live and how to die.

There is overwhelming voter support for doctor-assisted suicide and yet a legislative committee voted 12-1 against a bill that would legalize that form of suicide ("Legislators say 'no' to assisted suicide," Jan. 29). The most common objection (e.g., Rep. Paul Waterhouse, R-Bridgton) seems to be the "slippery-slope argument." If this form of suicide were made legal, what might happen in the future? Might we allow disabled people to take their lives?

Perhaps we should ask just who is being protected by legislation making doctor-assisted suicide illegal. It is certainly not the potential suicide. If the losses begin to outweigh the gains of living, being forced to remain alive is not a form of protection, but a form of slavery.

It is basically the position that others have the right to control our destinies. Rather than keeping doctor-assisted suicide illegal, I suggest we make it illegal for others to tell us how to live and how to die.

William Vaughan Jr.
Chebeague Island

Immigration Reexamined

Harvard Magazine

September 1996

Unwelcome mats:

<http://harvardmagazine.com/1996/07/immigrants.html>

<http://harvardmagazine.com/1996/07/immigrants.2.html>

Near the end of his "[Unwelcome Mats](#)" (July-August), Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco states: "All parturitions are painful and dangerous. They are also exhilarating and promising. Immigration, a key feature of the emerging transnationalism, today captures the pain, danger, and promise of a new life." His statement would take on a somewhat less paradoxical character if he were to be a little more explicit. For example, to whom is immigration painful and dangerous, and to whom is it exhilarating and promising? Those living in the United States may have different goals with respect to immigration than those living in Mexico, for example, but Suárez-Orozco treats the former as hysterical xenophobes and the latter as world citizens simply seeking a better life. With exactly the same data, he could have characterized the former as responsible guardians of their culture, and the latter as breeding beyond their means of sustenance. I expect politicians to employ misleading language, but need professors do the same?

William Vaughan Jr., Ph.D. '76

Chebeague Island, Me.

A prize for viruses
The New York Times
November 21, 1988

To the Editor:

In a Nov. 7 news [story](#), the computer virus released by Robert T. Morris Jr. was compared to the flight made by Mathias Rust, a young West German, past Soviet air defenses last year. Mr. Rust was jailed, but both he and Mr. Morris performed invaluable services by showing that certain security systems can be subverted. An enlightened approach to computer security would, I suggest, involve setting up prizes for penetration of systems (without actually doing any damage). Of course, bureaucrats hate surprises, which is why such a prize will never be offered.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.
Cambridge, Mass., Nov. 7, 1988

Office for Children...

The Boston Globe

October 30, 1985

There appears to be some inconsistency in the response of the Office for Children to the recent death of a child at the Behavior Research Institute. Children were placed at the institute, despite its use of aversive techniques, presumably because of the positive results that could be obtained at the institute and not elsewhere.

If some other institution were able to provide equal or better treatment without such aversive techniques, there was no reason to place children at BRI in the first place. If, on the other hand, no other institution can provide such quality treatment, what will happen to such children if BRI is no longer available?

It appears that the Office for Children is actually more concerned about its own image than about the children it is supposed to help.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN JR.

Department of Psychology and Social Relations

Harvard University

Cambridge

Another side of the web

Science News

September 8, 1984

In your article "Acid Rain's Political Web" (SN: 7/28/84, p. 58) it is stated that "most current legislative proposals to control acid deposition would cost between \$3 billion and \$6 billion per year...and raise electricity costs by as much as 10 or 15 percent. At the same time, coal mining jobs in the East would be lost, and Midwestern industries and utilities that use a great deal of energy would suffer."

This statement reflects one particular way of framing the problem, a way that implicitly strengthens how one will respond. In order to demonstrate this, consider the following rendition:

"Midwestern electricity users have been allowed to pay \$3 billion to \$6 billion less per year than the actual cost of their electricity. Mining jobs in the East have been created or maintained that cannot be justified economically, and Midwestern industries and utilities which use a great deal of energy have been enjoying a free lunch."

Kahneman and Tversky have shown experimentally that the particular way a situation is framed can influence one's response. I wonder if their findings can somehow be incorporated into scientific reporting so that it is more the objective situation, and less the way the situation is framed, that influences behavior.

William Vaughan Jr.
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