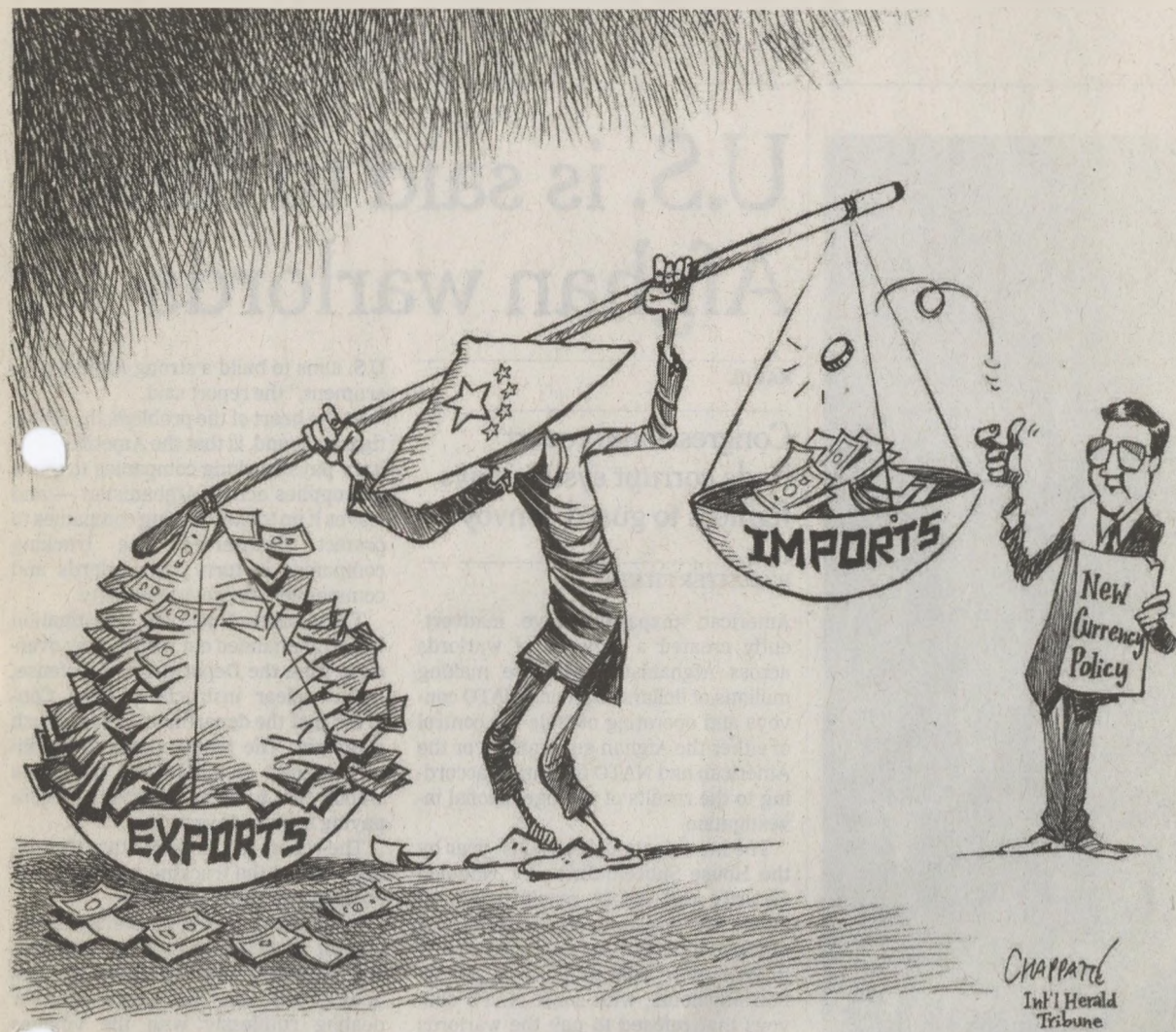
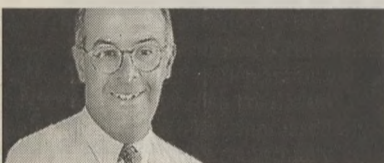


COMMENTARY LETTERS

VIEWS



Faustus makes a deal



David Brooks

It was the winter of 2007. Dr. Faustus, the famous left-wing philologist, was sitting in a coffee shop in despair over the Bush-Cheney regime and the future of his country.

Suddenly, Mephistopheles, who happened to be the provost at his college, appeared, sipping a double mocha frappuccino. He sat down next to Dr. Faustus and casually asked him if he would like to be granted any five wishes in exchange for his immortal soul.

This was Dr. Faustus's chance to do something grand for his country. He would lose his soul, but if he chose wisely, he could make the United States a bastion of liberalism forevermore.

"I agree, Lord of Darkness, if you grant me the following wishes: First, I would like the nation to be hurled into an economic crisis caused by Wall Street greed and recklessness. This will discredit free-market fundamentalism once and for all."

"It will be done," Mephistopheles vowed.

"Then I would like you to find the smartest Democratic politician in the land and make him president."

"It will be done."

"Then I would like you to create a political climate so he can immediately enact an \$800 billion spending package. This will avert economic collapse and show the American people how effective government can be."

"It will be done."

"Then I would like the Democrats to

pass a universal health care law. This will show a grateful nation that government can provide basic security."

"It will be done."

"If you do all this, America will be transformed. Conservatism will be in retreat and liberalism will reign supreme! Just to be sure, I would like a multinational oil company to cause the biggest environmental disaster in American history. This will completely discredit corporate America and remind people why they need strong regulations and global warming legislation."

"It will be done."

And, indeed, everything Dr. Faustus wished for came to pass. Yet he watched events unfold with growing horror. Not in 70 years had there been a sequence of events so perfectly designed to fortify liberalism. Yet the country wasn't swinging to the left; it was swinging to the right!

Surveys showed public opinion drifting rightward on issue after issue: gun control, abortion, global warming and the role of government. Far from leading Americans, Democrats were repelling them. Between 2008 and 2010 the share of voters who considered the Democrats too liberal surged from 39 percent to 49 percent, according to Gallup surveys.

Prospects for the 2010 election are grim. Election guru Charlie Cook suspects the Republicans will retake the House. National Public Radio polled voters in the 60 most competitive House districts currently held by Democrats. Democrats trail Republicans in those districts, on average, by 5 percentage points. Independent voters in the districts favor Republicans by an average of 18 percentage points.

By 57 percent to 37 percent, voters in these districts embrace the proposition that "President Obama's economic policies have run up a record federal deficit while failing to end the recession or slow the record pace of job losses."

Instead of building faith in government, the events of 2009 and 2010 further

undermined it. An absurdly low 6 percent of Americans acknowledge that the stimulus package created jobs, according to a New York Times/CBS survey.

Some Kool-Aid sippers on the left say the problem is that

Republicans have better messaging (somehow John Boehner became magically charismatic to independents). Others say the shift to the right is a product of bad economic times. But Dr. Faustus saw a deeper truth. Moderate suburban voters do not see the world as liberals do, even in the most propitious circumstances.

Bitterly and too late, Dr. Faustus saw that liberals can't have their way and still win elections in places like North Carolina, Ohio and Missouri. Bitterly and too late, Dr. Faustus recognized that economic policies are about values. If your policies undermine personal responsibility by separating the link between effort and reward, voters will punish you for it.

Bitterly and too late, Dr. Faustus acknowledged that after a period of overconsumption, Americans now see debt as the primary threat to their well-being. Dr. Faust and his fellow liberals may see themselves as the champions of the little guy, but in the new age of austerity, many voters see them as protectors of the special interests, as the guardians of the unaffordable promises.

Republicans have their own problems. They've begun over-reading their ideological mandate without the usual intervening step of actually winning an election. But the big story is that liberals have failed to create a governing center-left majority. If they can't do it in circumstances like these, when will they ever?

Dr. Faustus fell back into despair. His soul will spend all eternity trapped in Glenn Beck's microphone.

Spend now, save later



Paul Krugman

Spend now, while the economy remains depressed; save later, once it has recovered. How hard is that to understand?

Very hard, if the current state of political debate is any indication. All around the world, politicians seem determined to do the reverse. They're eager to shortchange the economy when it needs help, even as they balk at dealing with long-run budget problems.

But maybe a clear explanation of the issues can change some minds. So let's talk about budget deficits. I'll focus on the U.S. position, but a similar story can be told for other nations.

At the moment, as you may have noticed, the U.S. government is running a large budget deficit. Much of this deficit, however, is the result of the economic crisis, which has depressed revenues and required extraordinary expenditures to rescue the financial system. As the crisis abates, things will improve. The Congressional Budget Office, in its analysis of President Barack Obama's budget proposals, predicts that economic recovery will reduce the annual budget deficit from about 10 percent of G.D.P. this year to about 4 percent of G.D.P. in 2014.

Unfortunately, that's not enough. Even if the government's annual borrowing were to stabilize at 4 percent of

G.D.P., its total debt would continue to grow faster than its revenues. Furthermore, the budget office predicts that after bottoming out in 2014, the deficit will start rising again, largely because of rising health care costs.

So America has a long-run budget problem. Dealing with it will require a real effort to bring health costs under control — without that, nothing will work. It will also require finding additional revenues and/or spending cuts. As an economic matter, this shouldn't be hard — in particular, a modest value-added tax, say at a 5 percent rate, would go a long way toward closing the gap, while leaving overall U.S. taxes among the lowest in the advanced world. But if we need to raise taxes and cut spending eventually, shouldn't we start now? No, we shouldn't.

Right now, we have a severely depressed economy — and that depressed economy is inflicting long-run damage. Every year that goes by with extremely high unemployment increases the chance that many of the long-term unemployed will never come back to the work force, and become a permanent underclass. Every year that there are five times as many people seeking work as there are job openings means that hundreds of thousands of Americans graduating from school are denied the chance to get started on their working lives. And with each passing month we drift closer to a Japanese-style deflationary trap.

Penny-pinching at a time like this isn't just cruel; it endangers the nation's future. And it doesn't even do much to reduce our future debt burden, because stinting on spending now threatens the economic recovery, and with it the hope for rising revenues.

So now is not the time for fiscal austerity. How will we know when that time has come? The answer is that the

budget deficit should become a priority when, and only when, the Federal Reserve has regained some traction over the economy, so that it can offset the negative effects of tax increases and spending cuts by reducing interest rates.

Currently, the Fed can't do that, because the interest rates it can control are near zero, and can't go any lower. Eventually, however, as unemployment falls — probably when it goes below 7 percent or less — the Fed will want to raise rates to head off possible inflation. At that point we can make a deal: the government starts cutting back, and the Fed holds off on rate hikes so that these cutbacks don't tip the economy back into a slump.

But the time for such a deal is a long way off — probably two years or more. The responsible thing, then, is to spend now, while planning to save later.

As I said, many politicians seem determined to do the reverse. Many members of Congress, in particular, oppose aid to the long-term unemployed, let alone to hard-pressed state and local governments, on the grounds that we can't afford it. In so doing, they are undermining spending at a time when we really need it, and endangering the recovery. Yet efforts to control health costs were met with cries of "death panels."

And some of the most vocal deficit scolds in Congress are working hard to reduce taxes for the handful of lucky Americans who are heirs to multimillion-dollar estates. This would do nothing for the economy now, but it would reduce revenues by billions of dollars a year, permanently.

But some politicians must be sincere about being fiscally responsible. And to them I say, please get your timing right. Yes, we need to fix our long-run budget problems — but not by refusing to help our economy in its hour of need.

A spanking for the West

Meanwhile

JOANNA WEISS

According to a string of cheery television news reports, a big pastime for women across the United States is a group trip to the multiplex, wee ones in tow, for a moms-and-kids screening of "Babies."

Thomas Balme's documentary is, indeed, catnip for mommy-and-grandma types: a beautifully shot vérité look at four infants around the world. This isn't just 82 minutes of cute babies, but of carefully cast and gorgeously costumed multicultural babies, hailing from tribal Namibia and rural Mongolia as well as the light-and-wire-lined streets of Tokyo and San Francisco. It's proof that we're all human, a statement about the smallness of our world.

And it's an exercise in self-flagellation, which is why "Babies" might just be the meanest and most senseless "feel-good" movie of the year.

The critics' line on "Babies" is that it doesn't judge; its languorous scenes simply show the world from the babies' perspective, watching as they wallow in their parents' unconditional love.

Sounds nice, but any movie that's been edited makes judgments by definition, and in "Babies," most of those judgments come at the expense of the Westernized kids.

Worst off is baby Hattie, the stand-in for Americans, a girl from San Francisco whose parents try to expose her to other cultures. At one point she fingers an Asian-looking mobile, and the suggestion is clear: Silly Californians, trying to be part of the world.

Never mind that faux global awareness is the very point of the film. And never mind that Hattie's parents actually live in Oakland; San Francisco is a better metaphor for the high-tech, over-protective parenting set that this movie takes every opportunity to mock.

Something else you never learn from the film: Hattie had a home birth just like baby Ponijao, who took her first breaths on the dirt floor of a primitive Namibian hut. But we first glimpse Hattie in a hospital, hooked up to beeping and hissing equipment.

How sad, the film suggests, that we Westerners are so addicted to interven-

tion. We fret over seatbelts, while baby Bayar rides home from the Mongolian hospital on the back of a motorcycle. We help our kids get rid of the gross parts of the banana, while Ponijao lies face down in a stream and laps the water. We read parenting books, the horror — yep, that's Hattie's mom again, flipping through the pages of "Becoming the Parent You Want to Be."

Poor Hattie is portrayed as the victim of this eagerness, hamstrung compared to babies who are left unattended and free. Hattie plays with a Fisher Price plastic farm set; Bayar, half-naked in Mongolia, wanders alone among a herd of cows. Hattie gets rubbed with a lint

brush; Ponijao chews a bone covered in dirt. Worst of all, Hattie is forced to attend a hippie-dippy music class where the facilitator chants, "The earth is our mother, she will take care of us." At which point Hattie gets up from

her own mother's lap and heads determinedly for the door.

That's the movie's biggest punch line, but it's also the best critique: The earth is not, in fact, taking care of everyone equally. Yes, helicopter parents are easy to malign; the luxury of wealth and health gives us time to overthink, makes us susceptible to wipe warmers and crawling-baby knee pads and services that charge obscene rates to childproof homes. But the idea that there's no difference among kids across the world is oversimplistic and wrong.

Sure, life in Namibia looks fun when you're 8 months old. But what are the prospects for Ponijao's health? What does she have to look forward to? When your daughter is 20, whose life would you rather she have: Ponijao's or Hattie's?

That doesn't mean we should Westernize every kid, or that we can. But some Western interventions, in the name of health, safety and sanitation, aren't bad things to export. And if we happen to be born where safety is an obsession and good health a likelihood — where we have the time and fortune to be able to wipe cat lint off our kids — we should be thankful, not embarrassed, for what we have.

BOSTON GLOBE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Oil spills in Nigeria
The article "In Niger Delta, oil spills are a way of life" (June 18), reporting that spills are a major problem in the Niger Delta, misses crucial context that explains why they happen.

You make a comparison between the Exxon Valdez spill and Nigeria. The two are completely different. The Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria is the largest oil producer in the Niger Delta. In terms of volume, spills due to human error or equipment failure from its facilities over the last 10 years amounted to about 5 percent of the Exxon Valdez spill volume annually.

This is not to minimize the issue. Of course, any oil spill is a serious concern, and Shell works hard to reduce those within its control. It replaces equipment and hundreds of miles of pipelines each year. It compensates people affected, and it cleans up all spills, whatever the cause, as quickly and thoroughly as possible in an environmentally friendly way.

But most of the oil spilled from its facilities is because of sabotage and large-scale theft. These two causes accounted for 98 percent of its spill volume in 2009. Real progress to stop this won't happen without solutions to the root causes of widespread discontent in the delta. The very real security problems put our staff at risk and make it impossible to clean up spills as fast as we would like. MUTIU SUNMONU, LAGOS, NIGERIA
Managing director, Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria

More on 'throwing stones'
Platitudes such as "people in glass houses should not throw stones" (Letters to the Editor, June 19-20) are well and good, but I would like to add one of my own: "Two wrongs don't make a right."

With all due respect to the members of the academic staff of Newcastle University who wrote the letter in support of BP, I would simply ask how they would react if Exxon Mobil or Conoco Phillips were responsible for a leak of similar size and duration in the North Sea off the coast of the Britain. Would they abstain from throwing stones?
HOWARD M. LIEBMAN, BRUSSELS

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS
E-mail your comments and responses to letters@iht.com.

Pay just 82p a day for the IHT

and enjoy free home delivery!

A low-cost 16-week subscription saves 46% off the cover price, plus you can take advantage of our convenient and flexible home delivery service. Order today!



Great reasons to subscribe:

- Save 46% off cover price
- Free to your home or office
- Forwarding service
- Money-back guarantee

Call
0800 895 965
Quote offer code 4MWW

Or visit
subs.iht.com/save

Offer expires June 30, 2010 and is valid for new subscribers in the UK only. Hand delivery subject to confirmation by local distributor.

International Herald Tribune
global.nytimes.com