

U^{the}ndercurrent

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“It was as if an underground stream flowed through the country and broke out in sudden springs that shot to the surface at random, in unpredictable places.” Ayn Rand

PROGRESS IS OPTIONAL

*The source of technology and prosperity—the free human mind—
is unshackled only under capitalism*

by Valery Publius

Special Event Announcement:

Capitalism Awareness Week

Tuesday, September 27 – Tuesday, October 4

www.capitalismweek.org - see page 12

IN THIS ISSUE

Bigger than bin Laden: Why the Islamist Threat
Still Looms, Ten Years Later.....(4)

A Moral Operating System:
Software for Living(6)

Campus Clubs & Community Groups.....(12)



Would you give up the Internet for a million dollars? This was the question posed in a recent YouTube video distributed by The Fund for American Studies. Not surprisingly, many who were interviewed in the video said “no.” How much would they take to give it up? “In excess of fifteen to twenty million dollars,” said one. “In the billions,” said another. “You couldn’t pay me enough.” The last answer may be the most plausible.

We might expect people to pay a high price for a technology as valuable as the Internet. But in the United States and even more in the developing world,

the cost of access has been steadily dropping. Indeed, many popular Internet services like Google and Facebook are *free*. Many other forms of technology have become inexpensive and widely available. Advanced multifunctional smart phones—computers we carry in our pockets—are now barely even a novelty. But just a few decades ago personal computers were large, slow and expensive. We treat as permanent necessities of civilized life conveniences like air conditioning, refrigeration, cars, air travel, and electricity. But all of these goods, affordable today to people with only modest incomes, were either luxurious or non-existent

(continued on page 3)

OBJECTIVISM

The Undercurrent’s cultural commentary is based on Ayn Rand’s philosophy, Objectivism. Objectivism, which animates Ayn Rand’s fiction, is a systematic philosophy of life. It holds that the universe is orderly and comprehensible, that man survives by reason, that his life and happiness comprise his highest moral purpose, and that he flourishes only in a society that protects his individual rights. In these pages we hope to defend these values. To learn more about the ideas behind them, you can begin by reading Ayn Rand’s books, such as

The Fountainhead and *Atlas Shrugged*, or by visiting AynRand.org.

INTRODUCING THIS ISSUE

Three years into the “great recession,” the economy still weighs heavily on the minds of Americans and others around the world. And three years on, fingers of blame are still being pointed. Some say capitalism brought us to our current predicament. Others argue that the erosion of free markets and encroachment of government is at fault. For young adults beginning their economic lives, the significance is twofold: they weren’t involved in what happened, but have to confront and try to understand it anyway.

In this issue, we focus on the system that is at the center of so much controversy today: capitalism. While it has long been a contentious subject, the debate has

historically been seen as academic, a topic of discussion between economists and politicians. Most other people felt vague support or misgivings, but life went on without need of further thought. Now, that need has presented itself, and more people are thinking directly about the questions: what is capitalism, and is it a good thing? To this end, we are calling for a Capitalism Awareness Week, in which these questions are discussed. For more information, see our website.

Valery Publius approaches the subject of capitalism with a challenge: would you be willing to give up the Internet for a million dollars? Many would refuse outright, or at least feel conflict. But despite our love of technology, we often take it for granted. He argues that technological progress isn’t automatic, and must be recognized to be the result of the uniquely human capacity to create—and that capitalism is the system that protects and encourages that capacity.

Many who otherwise dislike capitalism admit to its ability to bring about material prosperity. But they criticize it for lacking a moral compass, for encouraging people to act in their narrow interests without thought of broader ethical principles. Noah Stahl argues that while many recognize morality as an important subject, few view morality as a practical tool. But it is: moral principles do much more than warn us what to avoid. Far more importantly, they give us a basis for rational goals and confident decision-making—fundamentals of successful living. It is this kind of success-driven morality for which capitalism is criticized. But why should we view individual achievement as immoral?

Finally, Alexander Hrin reflects on the sobering fact that many around the world are more than opposed to capitalism and a free society—they are willing to kill to destroy it. In his reflection on the decade since the September 11th attacks, Hrin argues that we need to recognize and oppose this deeper ideological crusade if we are to restore our safety and a permanent peace.

Many young adults complain that they feel powerless in the face of broad problems. But there is something of which we are in full control: our understanding of the world we live in. The only alternative is complacency and intellectual resignation—complacency about progress, about the nature and importance of morality, about the standard for success in the fight against global jihad. Willingness to shrug and accept conventional wisdom has far more to do with the cause of our challenges than most people realize. Fortunately, it’s never too late to seize the mental reins and decide for oneself what is true, and what to do about it.

THE UNDERCURRENT

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PROGRESS IS OPTIONAL

continued from page 1

for the wealthiest just a century ago.

Why then don't more of us consider ourselves rich? To be sure, especially in this uncertain economy, not everyone is financially secure. But there is little that the wealthiest can buy today with their extra millions that is not available in some form to those of modest means. More money will always buy greater quality food, more sophisticated technology and more elaborate vacations, but these luxuries are relatively incremental improvements in quality of life. Consider the broader historical perspective: compared to the average life in medieval Europe or modern-day Somalia, even the poorest Americans' standard of living is far closer to "luxury" than to the real poverty experienced in those distant times and places.

Yet many take our relative wealth for granted, as if prosperity were a law of nature. If the economy is gloomy, they assume that the storm clouds will always blow over and economic sunshine will always return. It's true that a nation's economy is a complex system with some degree of natural fluctuation. But in the context of history, our current level of material comfort is anything but "natural." It is historically unprecedented: for thousands of years there was essentially zero economic growth and little if any technological progress. What made it possible, and what *sustains* it? The cause of prosperity and progress is conditional, even delicate. It is not an impersonal, practically inexhaustible force of nature like the sun.

Consider the inexpensive cell phones that even the poorest of Americans have now owned for years, and which are now empowering millions in developing countries to start and run businesses. What made such widespread access to technology possible? Did charities concerned about "inequality" organize a petition to urge phone companies to lower their prices? Did governments subsidize the cell phone industry, or force them to sell more phones at a loss?

No. One well-understood factor is described by basic economics, and is credited to the same individuals whose indulgence in luxury is sometimes attacked by critics of "inequality." As economist Michael Cox reminds us in the video, those who can afford to be early adopters of technology pay a premium for new products. With

profits in hand, innovators recoup their development costs and learn how to produce and market the product at a price the broader public can afford. Moreover, those with accumulated wealth have the means to invest in the businesses that undertake such innovation in the first place.

So one important cause of the spread of technology and the opportunities it creates is simply the desire to make a profit. But personal spending and investment are not automatic—and neither is the desire to make a profit. The first casualties of the higher taxes championed by the critics of wealth inequality are the purchase of luxury technologies and the investment of surplus capital. Taxes and regulations on industry have a similar effect. Even if we presumptuously judge what other people can afford and assume that some can "afford" to pay more taxes, can the rest of us afford to lose their investment? And what happens if those who are taxed decide that working harder and harder for diminishing financial returns makes less and less sense?

“Poverty is not some ‘plague’ that afflicts a given society; it is the natural human condition. It is not poverty but wealth that is the novelty requiring explanation. The first wealth was not stolen from other cave men: they had none to be stolen. The first wealth... had to be created.”

Fortunately, the economic importance of incentives is well-understood, but there is an even more important factor accounting for the enormous improvement in quality of life over the last 200 years. To understand the deeper cause of this historical anomaly, we have to look beyond economics. Economics is concerned with a distinctively human practice: the production and trade of goods in a division of labor society. For this reason, our understanding of what is distinctive about human nature can affect whether or not we appreciate the facts of economics.

(continued on page 8)

BIGGER THAN BIN LADEN

Why the Islamist threat still looms, ten years later



by Alexander Hrin

Ten years after the horrific wounds he inflicted on the American people, Osama bin Laden is dead. His death brings a sense of closure to many eager to see justice served. With the most recognizable jihadist dead and gone, Americans have been prompted to reflect on the decade-long “War on Terror.” In fact, some have declared victory:

Peter Bergen, journalist and bin Laden authority, claimed that “killing bin Laden is the end of the war on terror. We can just sort of announce that right now.” President Obama concurred:

By us killing Osama bin Laden, getting al Qaeda back on its heels, stabilizing much of the country in Afghanistan so that the Taliban can't take it over.... [I]t's now time for us to recognize that we've accomplished a big chunk of our mission and that it's time for Afghans to take more responsibility.

After so many years fighting wars on multiple fronts, many weary Americans have argued that now seems as good a time as any to call it quits. Optimists will point to the absence of attacks by major terrorist organizations on U.S. soil since 9/11, the death of several top al Qaeda leaders, and the decreasing intensity of the Iraqi insurgency (albeit from levels that were best described as an “inferno of terror”) following the recent troop “surge.” Viewing bin Laden’s demise as a turning point, it seems plausible that, as President Obama has claimed, “we’ve accomplished a big chunk of our mission” in our war against the jihadists. With plans moving forward to reduce the number of troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan, some officials have argued that we’ve eliminated the most pertinent threats to America.

Yet for many, this declaration of victory rings hollow. It certainly lacks the resonance of the surrender of Germany and Japan at the end of World War II, and events of the last decade clearly show that the threat of attack has not been eliminated. Consider the escalation of jihadist attacks since 2001: an incomplete list includes the 2002 attacks in Bali, in Mumbai in 2003, 2006, 2008 and again in the summer of 2011, in Madrid in 2004, and London in 2005.

Added to those are the “homegrown” terrorists who have recently become major threats. The plans of the “underpants” and Times Square bombers were foiled, but the Fort Hood shooter was notoriously and tragically successful. Self-radicalized individuals are becoming more common,

and they are actively looking for ways to harm America. This is not what a victory looks like.

What is it that drives these people to prosecute their jihad or “holy war”? What is the end goal that they hope to bring about with their barbaric tactics? One jihadist currently serving a life sentence for the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh summarized his political goals: any law not dictated by Allah is a violation of Islam. What the jihadists want, from their own lips, is to spread a totalitarian Islamic theocracy (sometimes called “Islamism”). Secular laws protecting the rights of free speech, property, and religious worship (or lack thereof) are therefore unacceptable; on the other hand, laws prescribing the stoning of adulterers or banning women from driving are consistent with this legal philosophy. In the last decade, it is shocking how many nations and governments have moved in the latter direction.

One example is the rise of Hamas and the Palestinian opposition movement. Hamas has been classified by many governments as a terrorist organization for its willingness to use suicide bombings and rocket attacks against Israeli military and civilian targets. Its charter calls for the establishment of an Islamic Palestinian state and the obliteration of Israel. After its 2006 victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections, it began to adopt tenets of Islamic law. Palestinian researcher Dr. Kaled Al-Hroub observed that many actions of the new government are alarmingly similar to the totalitarian practices of the Taliban government:

We are talking about a long series of deeds, from the indirect coercion of female students to wear a *hijab* (without administrative memos or written orders), to the persecution [of girls] in restaurants and cafes, to the ban on smoking hookahs and 'searches' for immoral pictures on private computers.

Then there is the rise of Hezbollah, a small Shiite Muslim militia in Lebanon that has grown into a major political power and leads the current ruling coalition. While Hezbollah's initial goals included the establishment of an Islamic state, they have since limited themselves to the more “modest” goal of destroying Israel. They pursued this goal vehemently through rocket attacks on villages near the border with Israel, which culminated in war in 2006.

Since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, Iraqi politics has come to be dominated by groups that advocate for an Islamist state. The constitution developed for the new government forbids laws contradicting the teachings of Islam. What this will bring in the short term is unclear, but its logical conclusion is Islamic theocracy.

BIGGER THAN BIN LADEN

continued

“How do we attain victory over the jihadists? We must acknowledge that they are our enemies to the core. They are not misguided idealists who employ violent tactics in pursuit of a worthwhile, peaceful goal.”

In Egypt, Yemen and Libya, dictators have been overthrown by popular uprisings, but the only viable political coalitions are dominated by Islamist factions. In all the countries of the “Arab Spring,” popular unrest has drifted towards ever-increasing Islamism. Even Turkey, once the star example of a “moderate” Islamic nation, has begun to strip away the explicitly secular elements of its government. The Arab-Islamic world, for a variety of reasons, has moved ever closer to a community of nations dominated by Islamic law.

While it is true that not all who desire to establish Islamist states advocate violence or terror to do so, it’s also true that the goal of establishing Islamic theocracy is the end result that the jihadists are aiming for. Even if the vast majority of countries that establish Islamist governments never directly attack us, they are—either passively or democratically—going where the jihadists want them to go. If the Middle East becomes a community of Islamist states, they will have far more in common with the most potent threats to America than with America herself.

Consider Iran, the archetypical example of an Islamist government, and a major force motivating those who wish to create their own version of the same. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has consistently and flagrantly committed acts of barbarism against America, and more broadly against all nations and individuals they have identified as infidels. Iran facilitated the 1979 attack on the American embassy and subsequent hostage crisis; they issued a religious “fatwa” commanding loyal Muslims to murder Salman Rushdie for blasphemy; their terrorist proxies killed American troops in their barracks in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Iran has continued to make itself an ever more ominous threat to secular nations and their citizens.

Today, Iran’s leaders claim to be major actors in bringing about the apocalyptic events associated with the “12th Imam,” a disturbing thought for a nation that continues to attempt to refine weapons-grade nuclear material. Additionally, recent intelligence reports from Obama’s own Treasury Department provide evidence that Iran continues to funnel money to Al Qaeda (showing that the Islamist vs. Infidel conflict trumps that between Sunnis and Shiites).

Iran offers us a picture of how the issues of terrorism and the spread of Islamist theocracy are inextricably linked. It’s no accident that the exemplar of Islamist government is also the largest supporter of terrorism. For such a country, the secular systems of law in nations like America or Israel are blasphemous. Are we to be surprised at the zeal with which Iran has seized every means within its power to strike at us? It’s entirely consistent with the political goals and ethical code of the Iranian rulers to fund terrorism, pursue and deploy weapons of mass destruction, and destroy the only non-Islamic nation in the Middle East. In just over 30 years since the birth of the Islamic Republic, Iran has become the single largest threat to America; we would do well to be wary of the formation of other such Islamic states in the Middle East.

In three decades Iran has: taken Americans hostage, funded organizations that have been in direct armed conflict with the U.S. military, issued death warrants for citizens of Western nations, and openly trumpeted its intentions to obtain nuclear weapons.

(continued on page 10)

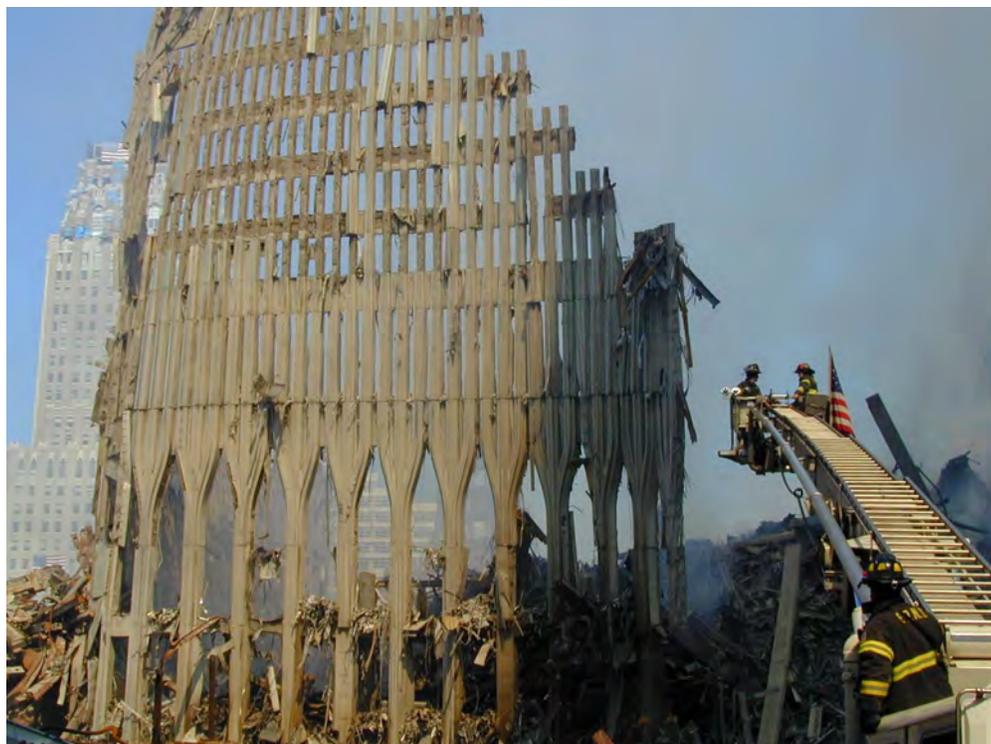
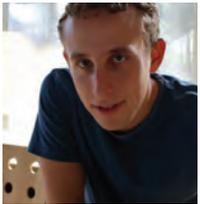


Photo by Michael Rieger/ FEMA News Photo

A MORAL OPERATING SYSTEM: *Software for Living*



by Noah Stahl

Damon Horowitz begins his recent TED presentation with the following question: What's better, iPhone or Android? Nearly everyone in the audience immediately raised a hand in favor of one or the other. Then Horowitz asked which moral framework is better: that of

John Stuart Mill or Immanuel Kant? Few hands were raised for either.

The point of the exercise was to demonstrate that while most people can immediately endorse their favorite smartphone, far fewer can identify the moral principles that underlie their daily decisions. Horowitz argues that with so many important questions facing us, hasty, unprincipled decisions are bound to produce poor or unexpected results, and that we need instead to be thinking about and making choices based on a consistent moral framework.

Horowitz is right: while most people have views about right and wrong, few ever think much about the underlying moral theories that would explain their views. Indeed, some would ask whether we need such theories. Common sense seems to provide plenty of guidance in most situations in daily life: in more specialized areas like software development or exercise, there are relevant, accepted prac-

tices that we can follow. To many people, comprehensive theories about right, wrong, values, and obligations seem superfluous.

Indeed, such undertakings as software programs or fitness regimens can be easily evaluated: either they work, or they don't. They either do the right thing (play a video or build muscle) or the wrong thing (crash or cause injury). In such cases, there is no obvious need to consider broader principles like ethical standards; the relevant, narrower standards seem to provide sufficient guidance.

Yet while writing a few lines of code doesn't seem to require ethical analysis, there are always broader ethical questions involved. Consider file sharing software such as Napster or BitTorrent, which allows users to download potentially pirated music, movies, and other content. Is their availability a good thing? The software itself does what it is intended to do; it works. But is the intended purpose a good one? What are the merits of making copies of somebody's intellectual property against their wishes? What share of responsibility do the creators of such software have with respect to how it is used? And where do such determinations come from?

To answer the latter questions, a higher kind of standard is necessary: a moral standard. Morality offers guidance not for any particular sphere of action, but for action in general. Rather than prescribing specific means to achieve a given end, morality provides a way to choose the ends.

Why is such guidance needed? Consider the alternative: to approach such questions in an improvised fashion, taking each on a case-by-case basis. When software or exercise is approached this way, the results suffer (poorly designed and error-prone code, minimal fitness gains). The same is true of life in general in an even more important sense: if sound principles and consistency are necessary to produce effective software and healthy bodies, those things are even more important to produce successful and happy people.

In the case of file sharing, for example, an often overlooked moral principle is that of justice: that we should grant to others what they have earned, both in our words and deeds. Most people recognize the virtue of thanking friends for gifts or family for supportive advice. Most also recognize that material goods are properly bought and paid for, not stolen. Yet when it comes to artists who

A MORAL OPERATING SYSTEM

continued

create music and entertainment, file sharers are content to acquire their content without granting them the proper recognition or material payment in exchange. Even if one doesn't recognize and feel remorse about the injustice involved, there is no escaping the practical harm: the creators of the things we value are deprived of the incentive to produce more.

Of course, moral principles are only important if the moral theory we follow leads to life-enhancing outcomes. What those outcomes should be is itself an important philosophical question, and there are many answers according to the moral philosopher you ask. Horowitz's examples of moral theories place importance on vague duties to sacrifice oneself to satisfy the well-being of others, standards that defy clear definition and therefore usefulness as guidance.

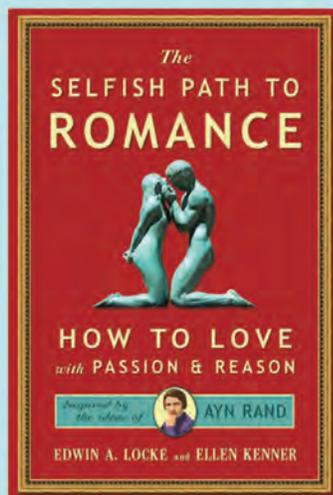
There is however a moral theory based on clear facts and achievable standards: the Objectivist ethics, which holds the individual's life and happiness as the standard against which his choices are measured. By placing rea-

“Morality offers guidance not for any particular sphere of action, but for action in general. Rather than prescribing specific means to achieve a given end, morality provides a way to choose the ends.”

son and evidence as the basis of morality, it is possible to avoid the ambiguity and contradictory advice for which the subject is historically notorious. For those interested in moral principles that identify what “works” to promote a rational life, Ayn Rand's unique philosophy is an indispensable tool.

Noah Stahl received his BS in Computer Engineering and MS in Information Assurance from Iowa State University. He currently works as an information security engineer in Tampa, Florida.

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PROGRESS IS OPTIONAL

continued from page 3

The relationship between our attitude about economic progress and our view of human nature is prominent both in economic theory and in conventional wisdom—particularly in commentary on the subject of capitalism. Critics of capitalism portray it in “social Darwinist” terms, claiming that it only permits “the survival of the fittest.” In their view, wealthy capitalists can only prosper “on the backs of the poor,” by exploiting workers and “gouging” customers.

To think that a capitalist’s success comes at the expense of the rest of society, that life in a free market is merely “dog eat dog,” reflects the assumption that human survival is no different than animal survival. An animal lives with limited resources in an environment to which it can only adapt using its limited instincts. A sheep grazing for too much grass deprives the deer of their supper. Wolves in one pack are a threat to those in another: they can only fight over the same sheep. Etc.

“We don’t flourish merely by adjusting to limited resources: we do so by altering our environment to expand the pool of available resources. Our “weapon” of survival is not brute strength, but the “strength” of our minds.

But human beings are neither wolves nor sheep, neither predator nor prey. We don’t flourish merely by adjusting to limited resources: we do so by altering our environment to expand the pool of available resources. Our “weapon” of survival is not brute strength, but the “strength” of our minds. Animals live in the moment, learn only repeated patterns driven by stimulus and response, and engage in behavior conditioned for a limited, comfortable niche. But we use our minds to conceptualize cause-and-effect relationships, allowing us to plant seeds to be harvested months in the future, to build shelters we will live in for years. We make factories and medicines and superhighways and more. We plan for and live in the future, not the present.

The first men lived without a single wheel, club, or bearskin to call their own. Poverty is not some “plague” that afflicts a given society; it is the natural human condition. It is not poverty but wealth that is the novelty requiring explanation. The first wealth was not stolen from other cave men: they had none to be stolen. The first wealth—whether it was a cutting tool or a makeshift shelter—had to be *created*. Thus, our species did not rise from caves to skyscrapers through plunder. At times in history some men fed off the products of others; feudal serfdom and plantation slavery come to mind. But the skyscrapers and the Internet and everything on which they depend were the products of free individuals grasping logical connections through the effort of thought.

Far from capitalism involving a “survival of the fittest” in which the wealthiest trample upon the poor, those of modest abilities actually benefit the *most* (compared to what they otherwise could do on their own) because of what they receive from the highly productive. When one human being lives successfully—whether as a scientist, an inventor, or a businessman—the result is not just “survival of the fittest,” but also the flourishing and prosperity of the rest of society in turn.

The man who does no more than physical labor, consumes the material value-equivalent of his own contribution to the process of production, and leaves no further value, neither for himself nor others. But the man who produces an idea in any field of rational endeavor—the man who discovers new knowledge—is the permanent benefactor of humanity. Material products can’t be shared, they belong to some ultimate consumer; it is only the value of an idea that can be shared with unlimited numbers of men, making all sharers richer at no one’s sacrifice or loss, raising the productive capacity of whatever labor they perform. (Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*)

The development of new ideas doesn’t benefit only those who learn these ideas. More impressively, new ideas benefit even those who do not understand them, by way of their implementation in new products and services. Consider the simple T-shirt. In the days before inexpensive mass-produced textiles, one would be lucky to own more than a single set of clothes. Wearing the same clothes all year, one would be vulnerable to the

PROGRESS IS OPTIONAL

continued

spread of diseases we now safely avoid. A worker in an early cotton mill might not have been paid much by today's standards. But with the money he took home from the factory (which he could not have built on his own), he could buy cheap, replaceable and even fashionable clothing and many other life-enhancing goods. He did not understand the Newtonian mechanics or the steam engines that went into the new mills of the day, but he and the rest of us are permanently indebted to Newton, Watt and all of the scientists and industrialists—the *thinkers*—who turned these ideas into a life-giving cornucopia for humanity.

The technology and prosperity that so many take for granted—all the way down to their T-shirts—depend even more fundamentally on the exercise of precious human intelligence. And the exercise of human intelligence, unlike the constant energy production of the sun, depends on delicate social conditions. In particular, and more important than financial incentive, wealth creators need *freedom*. The human mind—the ultimate source of wealth—does not and cannot discover subtle causal connections, formulate mathematical equations, or hit upon bold entrepreneurial innovations out of fear of punishment. The innovator is motivated by love for his work and the truth, and by his vision of the value of his creation. He works only by his voluntary choice, not by coercion.

And yet critics of capitalism advocate regulating productive endeavors and restricting not only the economic but the intellectual freedom of innovators. Pharmaceutical companies are subjected to years of scrutiny and enormous cost by the FDA before they can bring new drugs to market (if at all). Petroleum companies are encumbered by costly review procedures, often preventing them from developing new ways of unlocking plentiful sources of energy from deep below the earth. Financiers are inhibited from creating new financial instruments capable of providing crucial capital to young entrepreneurs. And companies like Google and Microsoft are threatened with antitrust legislation, causing them to divert resources that could be helping to create Web 3.0 or some other undreamt-of innovation, for what amounts to the crime of being *too successful*.

If Americans expect to have a regular supply of life-saving drugs, cheap and plentiful energy, easy capital and widely-available information, but simultaneously advocate shackling the innovators, they are not only taking progress for granted—they are complicit in preventing it.

We must rethink our complacency about technology and prosperity. The creators and innovators of the world on whom our comfort and lives depend are not an

“The creators and innovators of the world on whom our comfort and lives depend are not an unlimited natural resource... [T]hey need the recognition that [financial] rewards are deserved, the recognition of their right to live and therefore, to achieve.

unlimited natural resource. Their energy does not flow indefinitely like that of water, wind or sun; rather, they require specific conditions to continue to provide their intellectual and material surplus. They need freedom to experiment and to produce. They need financial rewards. And more than anything else, they need the recognition that these rewards are *deserved*, the recognition of their right to live and therefore, to achieve.

Would you give up the Internet for a million dollars? Would you give up life in civilization for a billion dollars? The answer should be obvious, but all too often the implications are not. When so many of us receive so much value for comparatively little in return, we should realize our most pressing debt is not the national debt, but our moral debt to centuries of creative innovators. It is a debt we can never repay—except by living up to their example, acknowledging that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and becoming productive achievers ourselves.

Valery Publius is a teacher living in the American South.

BIGGER THAN BIN LADEN

continued from page 4

We have responded with a great deal of talk, some minor trade sanctions that accomplish nothing, and the offer of an “open hand,” when President Obama promised, “If countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us.” The result? Richly deserved scorn. President Ahmadinejad responded: “Resistance will continue until Iran sends its enemies to the morgue. . . . [The U.S. and Israel] are on the verge of collapse and gasping their last breath.” Why does Iran maintain its belligerence? Because we have shown them that doing so brings no retaliation.

For ten years, America has been engaged in two foreign conflicts, which have mutated into bizarre hybrids of military occupation, nation building, and humanitarian aid. The results of these conflicts and strategies speak for themselves; meanwhile the nation that has made itself into the most serious legitimate threat has openly attacked us, and ridiculed us for our weakness. Is it any wonder that Islamism has begun to spread throughout the Middle East given that Iran has so successfully defied and attacked the world’s superpower?

What has happened to the few leaders and thinkers who have spoken out against Islamism? In the Netherlands, historically a safe haven for political dissidents, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a member of Dutch parliament, faced a revocation of her citizenship due to her outspoken opposition to barbaric Islamist practices like honor killings and genital mutilation. After a prolonged legal battle, Hirsi Ali left the Netherlands to live in the United States.

Geert Wilders, another member of the Dutch parliament, recently faced criminal charges of “hate speech” for helping to create a film which discussed the connection between the Koran and violent Islamist practices. Although he was acquitted, his prosecutors made an ominous statement that should make one’s blood run cold: “It is irrelevant whether Wilders’ witness might prove Wilders’ observations correct. What’s relevant is that his observations are illegal.”

If we reach the point where it is illegal to make *true* observations of practices in the Muslim world and connect them to the motivations of terrorists, then the ideals of free speech and free press are dying. If we are willing to see a man silenced for saying that a culture of Islamic theocracy is not compatible with a government that protects rights, then we will have discarded one of our most cherished ideals in order to appease our enemies.

Why has our response to the threat of Islamism been largely self-destructive? The most fundamental reason we have not defended our interests is because so many in the West have abandoned the conviction that our ideals—liberty, individual rights, and personal self-determination to name a few—are worth defending.

We have to be able to proudly assert that the Constitution of the United States is superior to Sharia Law, that a society where women have the right to become lawyers, doctors, business leaders, or soccer moms is superior to one in which women require a male escort to leave the house, that a society that recognizes the rights of apostates, blasphemers and homosexuals is superior to one in which they are killed by stoning, that freedom is superior to submission, and that reason and trade are superior to faith and violence. We have to grasp that our ideals are the ones that have cultivated human flourishing, and that such flourishing is impossible under Islamist values.

How do we attain victory over the jihadists? We must acknowledge that they are our enemies to the core. They are not misguided idealists who employ violent tactics in pursuit of a worthwhile, peaceful goal. We have to recognize that their means (strapping C-4 to their chests, blowing up subways, and crashing planes into buildings) and their ends (establishing a society ruled by Islamic values and laws) are inextricably linked with one another. A society in which laws are determined by “divine revelation” cannot foster rational disagreement or peaceful conflict resolution. When right and wrong, true and false, legal and illegal are matters understood only by faith, there is only one method to resolve differences: force. Both the means and the ultimate end of establishing Islamic theocracy are anathema to the Enlightenment ideals that have guided Western civilization. To eliminate the jihadist threat, we must oppose not only terrorism and violence, but also Islamic theocracy and Sharia Law.

Undoubtedly we currently face serious and imminent threats. A good start in resisting these threats would be to eliminate the hostile regime in Tehran. Next, we must stop pretending that governments of Islamist nations like Saudi Arabia are our friends, and ensure no aid flows from these nations to our enemies. We must cease our friendly treatment of “allies” like Pakistan who undercut our military efforts. We must acknowledge that when a nation or entire region moves towards Islamism, it becomes more dangerous.

But more importantly, we must re-learn the greatness of the West and the ideals of reason and freedom that are at its foundation. We must have the conviction that our way of life is worthy of protection from those who would destroy and supplant it. We must know at a fundamental level what it means to say—as so many of us did that day 10 years ago—“I am proud to be an American.”

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The Instructive Horror of Collectivist Currency

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OTHER ORGANIZATIONS OF INTEREST

Ayn Rand Institute (ARI) — www.aynrand.org

Ayn Rand Center (ARC) — www.aynrandcenter.org

Ayn Rand Lexicon — www.aynrandlexicon.com

Americans for Free Choice in Medicine (AFCM) — www.afcm.org

Anthem Foundation for Objectivist Scholarship — www.anthemfoundation.org

Capitalism Magazine — www.capmag.com

Coalition for Secular Government — www.seculargovernment.us

Clemson Institute for the Study of Capitalism — www.business.clemson.edu

Free Agriculture — Restore Markets (FA/RM) — www.fa-rm.org

Freedom and Individual Rights in Medicine (FIRM) — www.westandfirm.org

Objectivist Clubs Network — www.oclubs.org

The Association for Objective Law (TAFOL) — www.tafol.org/index.html

The Lucidicus Project — www.lucidicus.org

The Objective Standard — www.theobjectivestandard.com



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