

Graffiti for intellectuals



SIMON SAYS



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By Si Frumkin

WHEN MOSES WAS IN EGYPT LAND...

“I thought I would have no trouble finding him,” Ari said. “How many black pastors can there be at an Israeli celebration on a Sunday? But I never thought there would be so many people here...”

He tried his cellphone again and shrugged – no answer.

Ari was right. The crowd was probably more than 6 or 7 thousand, overflowing the 3 blocks of Wilshire Boulevard where the Israeli consulate is.

what they get from the media. Their leaders have forgotten the Jews who fought for civil rights, the Freedom Raiders in the

1960s, the Jewish kids that were murdered in the South by the KKK. “Ari’s phone rang, he listened, smiled. “They are here”, he said. We found them at the edge of the crowd, looking somewhat overwhelmed by the tumult, the crowd, the noise. There were about 20 of them, young men and women, looking curiously at the happy crowd.

Ari spoke to them for a few minutes about Israel, about the memorial for Martin Luther King that will be built in front of the Knesset in Jerusalem, about the black Ethiopian Jews who came to Israel illiterate and now have children graduating from universities, and

then someone tapped his shoulder and whispered something. Ari stopped and said, “I am sorry, I have to leave for a few minutes”. And

then, he smiled at them. “I am leaving Si with you. He will tell you a little about being a slave when he was just a kid. I think you’ll find it interesting...” And he hurried away.

I hadn’t expected to be asked to speak. I had no idea what to say or where to begin, how to hold their interest. And then it came to me.

“I was sentenced to death when I was 10 years old. And so was my mother, my father, all my friends and all my relatives. I never knew when the execution would be – today, tomorrow, in a few months, a few years? But we all knew that the sentence was there. The Nazis had decided that Jews were inferior human beings who had to die. But, there was a war on, the German men were away fighting and they needed people to do the work, so some of us were left alive to do slave labor. When the war was won and the men came back – the Jews would die. A dead Jew is better than a live Jew, they said.

“We were not the only ones who were seen as inferior. Blacks were just as inferior as Jews, maybe even more so. The only reason blacks

were not killed in great numbers in Europe was because there were no great numbers of blacks there.”

My audience was spellbound.

I told them of the 400 or so children with German mothers and black African French soldier

fathers in the Rhineland that had been occupied by the French after World War I.

They were murdered as soon as the French left and Hitler came to power. I told them of the black GIs in World War II who were taken prisoner by the Germans and not sent to POW camps – they were shot or sent to concentration camps to die with the Jews. I told them of the mutilated bodies

of black GIs found by Americans in liberated cities.

I told them of being liberated by the Americans at the age of 14, after my father died in Dachau. I told them that Jews knew all about slavery - they had been enslaved throughout history, most recently in the Holocaust - and that the songs about the Pharaoh and Egypt that gospel choirs sing tell the story of Jewish slaves 3000 years ago.

I would have told them more but the sound of the shofar stopped me. The three flags were being raised; I joined in singing the anthems of America and Israel. There was joy and pride in the air and the black kids hugged and thanked me. I hope they will remember what they had seen and heard.



Si Frumkin and friends

It was the weekend before Rosh Hashana and we had come to see and celebrate the raising of the Israeli flag in front of the consulate’s building. The three flagpoles – for the flags of America, California and Israel waited for the ceremony, the crowd sang to the music from the stage that was filled with celebrities – politicians, actors, rabbis – and everyone seemed to have a small Israeli flag to wave.

Ari, an Israeli friend who is very active in the Israel Christian Nexus, told me that he had invited the black pastor to bring some of his congregation to the event and that he wanted to speak to them about Israel and its relationship with the black community. “I want them to know that the only time that Africans were taken out of Africa not to slavery, but to freedom was when Israel brought Ethiopian Jews there,” he said. “So many of the African Americans, if they even know what and where Israel is, think of it as an apartheid state, a cruel, oppressive, militant oppressor of unfortunate Palestinians. It is sad but this is



RIISING AMBITIONS, SINKING POPULATIONS

Nicholas Eberstadt, New York Times, October 25, 2008

RUSSIA IS A RISING POWER TODAY, AND WILL BE DOING A LOT MORE RISING IN THE DECADES AHEAD. AT LEAST THIS IS WHAT WE HEAR NOWADAYS FROM pundits, Western intelligence services, presidential candidates and, of course, Russian officials themselves.

The Kremlin's own supreme confidence in this vision of the Russian future was captured nicely by its announcement last year that it expects to be the world's fifth largest economy in 2020, along with China, India, Japan and the United States. Despite the current global economic crisis, Russian officials are still predicting continuing rapid growth for their nation; Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is even talking of a robust 5.5 percent growth rate for Russia for the coming year.

To international audiences transfixed by Moscow's military swaggering in Georgia or dazzled by the newfound oil wealth of the Russian petro-state and its billionaires, this notion of an unstoppable Russian ascent may seem plausible, even compelling. To anyone who pays attention to population trends, however, it is absurd.

Russia is in the midst of a genuine demographic disaster from which its rulers have no obvious exit strategy. Although the Russia's fortunes (and the Kremlin's ambitions) have waxed on a decade of windfall profits from oil and gas, the human foundations of the Russian nation — the ultimate sources of the country's wealth and power — are in increasingly parlous straits.

Despite net immigration since the end of Communism, the Russian Federation's population is nearly seven million people smaller today than at the start of 1992. In the post-Soviet era, Russia has seen three deaths for every two births. Despite a "baby bonus" scheme unveiled by the Kremlin two years ago and a small rise in the birth rate, deaths outnumbered births in Russia by over 250,000 in the first half of 2008.

Russia's health situation today is a disaster — substantially worse than during the Mikhail Gorbachev years or even the Leonid Brezhnev era. In 2006, overall life expectancy in Russia, at fewer than 67 years, was actually lower than it had been at the end of the 1950s, nearly half a century earlier. For a literate, urbanized society during peacetime, such a monumental public health failure is an extraordinary historical anomaly. Russian life expectancy nowadays is about the same as India's, and life expectancy for Russian men, today barely over 60 years, is lower than for their counterparts in Pakistan.

Russia's great leap backwards in health is most severe for the country's working-age population. From 1965 to 2005, the death rate (that is, the number dying per 1,000 of population) for Russian men between the ages of 15 and 64 jumped by an average of more than 50 percent. Perhaps even more shocking, rates for working-age women in Russia rose by more than 30 percent during those same years.

Meanwhile, of course, workers in the rest of Europe (and for that matter in virtually all the rest of the modern world) were becoming progressively healthier and more robust. Nowadays, according to the independent Human Mortality Database, a man from the Netherlands does not face the same risk of death as a 30-year-old man in Russia until that Dutchman is almost 60.

In and of themselves, these crippling health trends augur ill for Russia's productivity prospects or economic outlook: it is unrealistic to expect Irish standards of living or rates of economic growth from a population facing Indian mortality schedules. But the economic implications of these trends may be even worse than they appear at first glance. Under current patterns, a 20-year-old man in Russia today stands less than even odds of making it to a notional retirement at age 65. (By contrast, five out of six similar American men can expect to reach their 65th birthday, and the chances are even better in Japan and most of Western Europe.)

With such a brutally high burden of premature mortality and such a radical foreshortening of working life, the cost-benefit calculus for higher education or additional training tilts against investments in knowledge and skills for the work force. Yet in the modern world economy, investments in "human capital" are one of the main engines for stimulating sustained economic growth and eliciting the general spread of national prosperity.

Because Russia's health crisis looks so utterly abnormal for an industrialized society, one might assume the problem could be quickly remedied through the usual methods: better living standards and more sensible medical policies from the Kremlin. But resolving the Russian health crisis will not be that easy. Russia's per capita income level has already risen by about 80

percent over the past decade (thanks largely to the oil and gas boom), yet this has hardly budged high mortality rates. The trouble is that in the pathological tangle that frames health conditions in modern Russia, the abnormal has become the new norm.

Russia's great killers today are not infectious diseases that might be cured with a pill or prevented through an injection. Instead, they are chronic and non-communicable afflictions. According to the World Health Organization, Russia's death rates from cardiovascular diseases (mainly heart attacks and strokes) are roughly four times as high as in the European Union. Mortality from "external causes" (homicide, suicide, injury) is more than five times as high.

Even a highly effective medical policy cannot hope to control those sorts of epidemics swiftly. After all, heart disease reflects a lifetime's accumulation of insults on the victim's system. And those appalling human losses through injury stem from behavioral habits, including the country's long and deadly romance with the vodka bottle.

Given the "negative momentum" in Russian health trends today, gains over the coming generation may be grudging at best. Simply re-attaining their parents' survival prospects would count as a significant health advance for today's middle-aged Russians. But if Russian men "succeeded" in that quest, their life expectancy would still be barely 62 years — lower than the current estimated level in impoverished Bangladesh.

If projections by the United Nations Population Division come to pass, Russia's population will fall by 10 million more from now to 2020. Those same projections envision Russian life expectancy lagging ever further behind global averages by 2020 to 2025, in this view, overall life expectancy in Russia would actually be a year lower than average for the world's less-developed countries — with the men's expectancy nearly five years below the third world mean.

Demography may not be destiny, of course. But this is not a portrait of a successfully and rapidly developing economy — much less an emerging economic superpower.

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You have IN GM'S VOLT A PERFECT CAR OF THE AGE OF OBAMA -- OR AT LEAST THE HONEYMOON OF OBAMA, BEFORE THE REALITY PRINCIPLE KICKS IN.

Even as GM teeters toward bankruptcy and wheedles for billions in public aid, its forthcoming plug-in hybrid continues to absorb a big chunk of the company's product development budget. This is a car that, by GM's own admission, won't make money. It's a car that can't possibly provide a buyer with value commensurate with the resources and labor needed to build it. It's a car that will be unsalable without multiple handouts from government.

The first subsidy has already been written into law, with a \$7,500 tax handout for every buyer. Another subsidy is in the works, in the form of a mileage rating of 100 mpg -- allowing GM to make and sell that many more low-mileage SUVs under the cockamamie "fleet average" mileage rules.

Even so, the Volt will still lose money for GM, which expects to price the car at up to \$40,000.

We're talking about a headache of a car that will have to be recharged for six hours to give 40 miles of gasoline-free driving. What if you park on the street or in a public garage? Tough luck. The Volt also will have a small gas engine onboard to recharge the battery for trips of more than 40



miles. Don't believe press blather that it will get 50 mpg in this mode. Submarines and locomotives have operated on the same principle for a century. If it were so efficient in cars, they'd clog the roads by now. (That GM allows the 50 mpg myth to persist in the press, and even abets it, only testifies to the company's desperation.)

Hardly mentioned is the fact that gasoline goes bad after a few months. If the Volt is used as intended, for daily trips of 40 miles or less, the car's tank will have to be drained periodically and the gas disposed of.

The media have been terrible in explaining how the homegrown car companies landed in their present fix, when other U.S. manufacturers (Boeing, GE, Caterpillar) manage to survive and thrive in global competition. Critics beat up Detroit for



building SUVs and pickups (which earn profits) and scrimping on fuel-sippers (which don't). They call for management's head (fine -- but irrelevant).

Get rid of CAFÉ? Reign in the UAW? Pressure the labor unions to be productive or else do it for less abroad? Interesting suggestions that may work but are they realistic?

These pre-mortems miss the point. Critics might more justifiably flay the Big Three for failing long ago to seek a showdown with the UAW to break its labor monopoly. In truth, though, politicians have repeatedly intervened to prevent the crisis that would finally settle matters.

The Carter administration rushed in with loan guarantees to keep Chrysler out of bankruptcy. The Reagan administration imposed quotas on Japanese imports to prop up GM. Both parties colluded in the fuel-economy loophole that allowed the passenger "truck" boom that kept Detroit's head above water during the '90s.

Barack Obama and Nancy Pelosi now want to bail out Detroit once more, while mandating that the Big Three build "green" cars. If consumers really wanted green cars, no mandate would be necessary. Washington here is just marching Detroit deeper into an unsustainable business model, requiring ever more interventions in the future.

The Detroit Three will not bounce back until they're free to buy labor in a competitive marketplace as their rivals do. In the meantime, private money, even in bankruptcy, almost certainly will not be available to refloat GM and colleagues. Nationalization, with or without a Chapter 11 filing, is probably inevitable -- but still won't make them competitive.

History seldom affords such perfect analogies: In 1968, the Penn Central merger (a proxy for GM-Chrysler) was

touted as a fix for a sagging rail business. In two years, the company was in bankruptcy. When a judge couldn't find new lenders, Washington absorbed them into government-owned Conrail, but the death spiral continued. Finally, Congress passed the deregulatory Staggers Act, which overnight gave the rail industry back its future. Conrail was triumphantly reprivatized in 1987.

We're about to replay this ordeal with the auto industry. Let's at least give ourselves a chance to be successful on the first try.

The simplest step forward would be to get rid of the "two fleet rule," devised by Congress's fuel-mileage managers to keep Detroit making small econoboxes in high-cost UAW factories. Dumping the rule would force the UAW to compete directly inside each company for jobs against cheaper workers abroad.

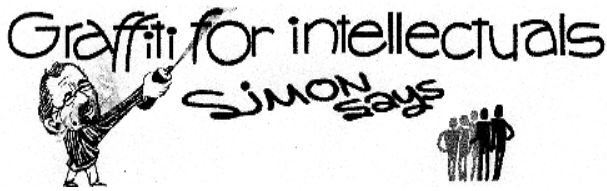
Even better would be to dump CAFE altogether. If Congress really thinks consumers must be encouraged to use less gas, replace it with an intellectually honest gas tax. Mr. Obama promised to transcend the old stalemates -



- let him begin with the 30-year-old fraud that our fuel-economy rules represent.

He ran a brilliant campaign, but his programmatic prescriptions amounted to hand-waving designed to capture the presidency rather than tell voters what really to expect. This may have been a virtue in campaigning but it becomes a handicap in governing. The public now has no idea what to expect -- except miracles, reconciling all opposites, turning all hard choices into gauzy win-wins. Thanks to Detroit, his honeymoon is about to end before it begins.

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McCain, Obama and Taxes Jonah Goldberg, L.A. Times. 11/04/08

We almost had a really interesting conversation about taxes in the waning days of the election. Almost.

To the surprise of few, it was discovered that Barack Obama favors something called "redistributionism." John McCain, it was discovered, opposes it -- which also surprised a lot of people.

To a certain extent, the outrage from folks on the right, at times including yours truly, over Obama's response to "Joe the Plumber" was overdone. It was, after all, Teddy Roosevelt -- McCain's hero -- who introduced the progressive income tax for precisely the purpose of spreading the wealth around. The maverick's campaign saddlebags are heavy with redistribution policies that redistribute wealth as well.

I still believe that redistribution for its own sake is little more than institutionalized covetousness. But that's a subject for another day. What was left out of the national tax conversation was the reality of the situation: America already redistributes its wealth. A lot of it. In fact, we're one of the most progressive countries in the world in this regard.

Now, first let me vent a peeve. Many people think "progressive" means "good," even though something can be progressive and bad, too. When economists refer to a "progressive" income tax, they merely mean a tax rate that increases as you move up the income ladder. (Right now in the U.S., the poor pay somewhere between 0% and 10% in federal income tax. The middle class pays 15% to 28%, and the highest earners pay 33% or 35%.) But most liberals also think that the income tax is also "progressive" in the same sense that fair-trade coffee and weepy acous-

tic guitar college music are progressive -- i.e. good and enlightened.

Either way, the U.S. tax code is a lot more progressive than you might think. A new study by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reveals that the United States "has the most progressive tax system and collects the largest share of taxes from the richest 10% of the population." Our tax system is in fact the most "pro-poor," according to a Tax Foundation analysis of that study, of any developed country's save Ireland. That's right, we're more progressive than France and Sweden.

The bottom 40% of income earners receive more from the federal income tax system than they pay into it. Meanwhile, the top 10% pay 71% of all income tax, despite only earning 39% of our pretax income. Taxes on the top 1% constitute 40% of tax dollars.

Lower- and middleincome workers pay a lot in other forms of taxation, particularly regressive payroll and sales taxes. Indeed, that's one reason Obama wants to offer the middle class a tax cut. I don't like his version of it, but I think he's right that the middle class deserves some tax relief.

But what all Americans need is tax reform, no matter who our next president is. Our tax code is outrageously impenetrable. And we've built a system that treats the wealthy like an inexhaustible natural resource.

Experts on economic development have long noted what they sometimes call the "oil curse." Countries with huge oil reserves be-

come economically wealthy but democratically impoverished, because the government can fund itself without taxing the middle class. As a result, the middle class demands less accountability from government because, heck, they didn't pay for it. (No taxation, no representation.) In the process, the people become subjects rather than citizens.

Both candidates have a tendency to see villainy as explanations for our economic woes. Obama thinks opposing tax increases is unneighborly and selfish. McCain has a long habit of denouncing Wall Street "greed."

One moral hazard of such attitudes is that the investor class will start applying its entrepreneurial skills to protecting its existing wealth from the tax collector rather than trying to create more wealth.

But the greater danger is that millions of Americans might believe that all that is keeping them from the good life is the tightfistedness of people doing better than them and a government unwilling to pry those wealthy fingers open. That's a recipe for an unhealthy political culture.

A sane tax code, under any president, would be simple, clear and direct. We're not going to give up on redistribution in the form of, say, the earned income tax credit. But it's important that the working and middle classes feel as if government spending comes out of their wallets too. Otherwise, the line between citizen and subject is blurred and the costs of government are seen as someone else's problem. \$