

could be used only for "non-lethal" purposes, the President could delete the restrictive language and keep the funds. Or say a Medicaid bill were passed, after much congressional give-and-take, containing language prohibiting the use of such funds for abortions. A President could simply strike the proviso and use Medicaid funds for abortions. In both instances the President would be converting a conditional appropriation into an unconditional grant of funds. He would nullify the compro-

mise that allowed Congress to pass the appropriation in the first place. The item veto would mean, if nothing else, many more vetoes. At present, Presidents do not invoke the veto power frivolously, and Congress treats vetoes with respect. To override a presidential veto generally requires considerable political leadership and effort and also precious legislative time. Congress goes to some length to avoid presidential vetoes, often by deleting items that are offensive to the executive branch.

Giving the President item veto authority would profoundly alter these conditions. What is now unusual will become routine. With itemized appropriation bills, a typical bill would offer hundreds of opportunities for an item veto. The President is currently presented with approximately 300 bills a year. With item-veto authority, he might easily have 10,000 candidates to veto. If he vetoed only ten percent, Congress would confront a thousand override decisions. The sheer

impracticality of this system overload should give its supporters pause.

President Reagan was correct when he said that the budget process has broken down. His solution, however, is faulty and serves to divert our attention from plausible solutions to our chronic budget deficit problems. Thomas Jefferson, always a man to take seriously, advised that in seeking reforms one should be sure the patch is commensurate with the hole. The item veto is a poor fit. □

## PRESSWATCH



## MYSTERIES AND OVERSIGHTS

by Michael Ledeen

The campaign for some kind of oversight for the media, resulting in the establishment of some standard of accountability, is gathering momentum. It recently received a ringing endorsement from the *Financial Times* of London, which is as fervent a defender of freedom of the press as one could ask for. On April 27, the *Financial Times* lead editorial ("The Conduct of Newspapers") put it beautifully:

Some of the failings of the press hardly need to be rehearsed. There is the intrusion into privacy, which is resented by those at the top of society as well as those less elevated. There is the manufacturing and embroidering of quotations. Not least, there is the use of money to persuade individuals to supply their story to one particular paper. None of that is defensible.

Remember that last line, please: "None of that is defensible." And if you don't change your ways, you guys in the media, the legislature is going to get you. The *FT* has figured this out, even if our own media mavens haven't:

Statutory regulation would almost certainly lead to the suppression of some stories that ought to be published. It would also produce a running conflict between the press and the regulatory authorities. . . . Yet the pressure for regulation is mounting.

The British have something called the Press Council, to which aggrieved parties can appeal, and which issues

*Michael Ledeen is senior fellow in international affairs at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.*

statements (which are supposed to be printed by the newspapers or magazines). But it is not particularly effective, and the press generally ignores it whenever possible. As the *FT* editorialists note, if this institution, with its calls for voluntary standards of conduct, cannot be strengthened, then "the case against statutory action will begin to lapse." In other words, Parliament will step in.

We are in a similar predicament, but without the clear voice of our own *FT*, and without a Press Council. We had better get cracking. If you listen closely to Capitol Hill, you will hear the sound of paper shuffling . . .

### First Anniversary of The Safe Sex for Michael Kinsley Packet

Lest we forget, it was just one year ago when that modern seer, the oracle of the *New Republic*, Michael Kinsley, announced to the world that within one year AIDS would disappear as a major issue in the American media. With that flair for iron-clad logic for which he is so well known and respected by thoughtful persons everywhere, Kinsley proclaimed that since "nuclear war" had disappeared as an issue, AIDS could not help but follow suit. After all, wasn't nuclear war even more threatening than AIDS?

The year has passed, and the AIDS issue shows no signs of going away. Indeed, we are now in some danger of being drowned in the press coverage of the disease, and even retired admirals are issuing pronouncements.

So please send Michael another Safe Sex Kit for Bastille Day, to remind him

of the fallibility of human judgment. And the seriousness of AIDS.

### Money to the Soviet Union

Slowly but surely Congress is beginning to focus its attention on the vitally important issue of credits and loans to the Soviet Union. Senator Bill Bradley has given some intelligent speeches on the subject, and on May 27, Tom McMillen wrote a first-class op-ed piece in the

*Baltimore Sun* in which he concluded:

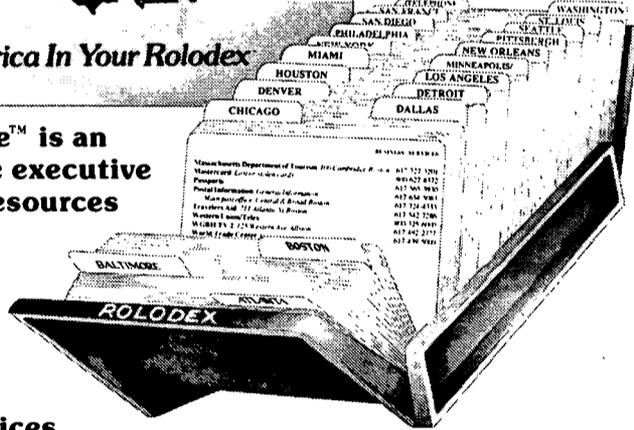
Capital is as much a commodity as wheat or gold. Allowing it to flow freely to the Soviet bloc deprives us of an important policy tool and reward. The customer of any lending institution must state what he will use the funds for: we should ask no less of Soviet-bloc borrowers.

In other words, don't give unattached loans to the Soviet bloc unless it com-

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plies with its international agreements (such as Helsinki).

Maybe we need more basketball players in high positions?

### Harry G. Summers, Jr.

A word of tribute is due to Harry G. Summers, Jr., the celebrated former Army colonel who writes for *U.S. News & World Report* (and who in the June *American Spectator* penned an eloquent piece on conservatives and containment). Colonel Summers wrote a fine column on American drug policy in early June (I read it in the June 2 *Washington Times*) in which he lamented the lack of seriousness in our government. Two paragraphs are particularly noteworthy for their down-to-earth reminder of what is real and what is fantasy. Complaining about congressional calls for the use of the armed forces to interdict drug shipments into the United States, Summers noted that if the military actually sealed off our borders by using armed force, Congress would be the first to denounce such "wanton aggression." Then come the paragraphs in question:

Congress . . . should understand the fundamental nature of military forces—to kill and destroy in the name of the American people. If you intend to do that when an aggressor threatens vital interests or survival is at stake, then it's a proper job for the military.

But if you don't have the resolve to stand by an indictment, or the backbone to carry through your threat to confiscate property, why would anyone believe you'd actually use military power to kill drug smugglers and destroy their boats, planes, and paraphernalia?

Quite right.

### Mysteries

•You may have noticed that in the past two months the press coverage of the Red Army withdrawing from Afghanistan has been quite extraordinary. The *Los Angeles Times* had a three-part series, all the networks and major media had extended interviews with Soviet soldiers, and suddenly the *mujahedeen* have names and faces. A moment's reflection will suffice to explain this sudden outburst of information from an area that had been very hard to penetrate for our journalists: The Russians let them in.

•All the major newspapers were shocked by the results of the French parliamentary elections. They were expecting—indeed, having seen the data from the usually highly accurate political polls, they had predicted—a Socialist landslide, and when the Socialists failed to get even a majority, they didn't know what to do. It was a case where the results were taken for granted, the stories written well before the event, and the editors' attention was

on other matters. On the morning after the first round, you had to read several inches down to find out what had actually happened, and what a surprise it was. Flora Lewis later wrote darkly about the need for an official investigation into the pollsters (for what—being wrong?), but she should have worried more about reportage. Prophecy has always been a tough profession, after all.

### Carl Rowan

Someone should explain to Mr. Rowan—the intrepid gunman of Chevy Chase—that nobody objects to his having a gun in his home for his own protection (although having a pistol suggests either that he's an expert marksman or that he doesn't know what he's doing). He did two things wrong: he didn't register, and he lectured the world on how wrong it was for *it* to have guns. His angry sermon to his readers, announcing he would keep his weapon so long as there were killers and drug dealers on the loose, missed the point. No one begrudges him the right to defend himself, his family, and his property. We only ask that he apply the same standards to everyone, and abide by the law. Judge not, Carl . . .

### Singapore

I love Singapore (and was happy to see the *Washington Post's* fine food editor, Phyllis Richman, give Singapore credit for having perhaps the best food in the world), and was disturbed to see its exceptional prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, get so irritated with the *Asian Wall Street Journal* that he banned all but a token number of copies from the country. And then, when an American diplomat was found to have encouraged opposition politicians, the roof

fell in: the poor Foreign Service officer was expelled, and there was a full-scale brouhaha, which currently (mid-June) stands at an impasse, with Singapore calling for an international commission to investigate the matter.

Mr. Lee made a mistake when he threw out the *Journal*, and he as much as admitted it by early June when he said in a parliamentary address that "we can denounce stupid newspapermen, the offshore press. They irritate us, they annoy us, but remember they can't really do us much harm." But America *can* harm him, and, like most national leaders, Lee Kuan Yew has learned that Americans often don't know what they're doing. So let's listen for a moment to the way he described it to his own people. It's hard to do it better (text from the *Straits Times*, June 2):

Although Americans mean well, they want the world to be like them, because they believe it will make for a better world.

We must be careful, because some of their best-intentioned schemes turn out to be naive and unwise, and end up disastrously. You heard what happened in Iran. They meant well. They wanted Iran to become a modern state. . . . Whole faculties were starting up, all kinds of esoteric subjects . . . you name it, the Americans will deliver. . . . What was missing? Democratic rights, freedom of speech, freedom of association.

So they egged on opposition groups and the Shah. . . . They started meddling around, they meant well. President Jimmy Carter came along with the human rights campaign, the Shah got confused and bewildered. . . . The Ayatollah came back. And gut feelings, not rational democratic impulses. . . . Now, 40 odd million Iranians have gone back to the Dark Ages . . .

So we have to use our own judgment . . .

That's the way it is if you're govern-

ing a country with good relations with the United States, but which does not meet American standards of democracy. I can well imagine that Lee Kuan Yew, who Henry Kissinger once called "the smartest man in the Western world," is frightened that the American contagion might reach his shores. We can perhaps survive the chaos we unleash, but less stable and self-confident societies might not.

I also can understand the *Wall Street Journal's* concern that Lee Kuan Yew shows signs of undoing what might have been Asia's finest achievement. Nonetheless, it was with a real shock that I found *Journal* editorialists comparing Singaporean restrictions on freedom of speech with those of Eastern Europe. In a series of editorials, the *Journal* argued that since Lee Kuan Yew was intolerant of political opposition, and used preventive detention against persons who, in the *Journal's* view, were guilty only of criticizing the government, Singapore was to be condemned and put on the same plane as East Germany or Poland.

The *Journal* has gotten carried away by its laudable desire to protect free speech everywhere. Most countries in the world, including places like Italy, France, and Spain, have preventive detention, and it is relatively easy in those countries to find cases of individuals who have spent years in jail without ever hearing any solid evidence against them. The phenomenon in Italy is so well known, in fact, that one of the very best Italian movies—*A Citizen Above Any Suspicion*, starring Alberto Sordi—was about a former Italian citizen who, after years of living in Sweden, takes his Swedish wife and children on a return trip to Italy. He is arrested at the border, thrown from one prison to the next, and never does find out why.

Such phenomena do exist, even in long-established societies. They also exist in Singapore, and they are just as wrong there as anywhere else. But no mature person would equate Italy or France with Eastern Europe, and Singapore shouldn't be, either. Singapore's problems are those of a fundamentally democratic society which is still evolving, still finding its sea legs in the turbulent waters of the late twentieth century. Its leaders make mistakes, but however disturbing, those are exceptional, not part of the basic pattern of life. In Eastern Europe, such actions are the rule. The *Journal* should understand that, and not vent its spleen on a man and a country that have contributed a great deal to the security and wisdom of the Western world.

That's what happens when corporate interests overwhelm geopolitical judgment. □



# THE TALKIES



## SUMMER FLICKS

by Bruce Bawer

When it comes to your typical summer movie, the question is not whether the filmmakers have come up with a new idea, but whether they've managed to do anything interesting with an old one. And there's no question but that *Funny Farm* makes use of one of the most ancient and wheezy of story ideas: an urban couple, eager to escape the rat race and get acquainted with nature, move to the countryside, only to discover that (in the words of the current movie's ad copy) life in the country isn't all it's cracked up to be. Now, if you've seen a few episodes of the Eddie Albert-Eva Gabor sitcom "Green Acres" (or the old movie *The Egg and I*), you know that this story idea comes equipped with a less-than-infinite number of comic complications, to wit: the charming house that our couple move into proves to be in astonishingly primitive condition; their simple, goodhearted country neighbors are revealed to be morons, hucksters, and screwballs; the natural world that appeared so beautiful shows itself to be dangerous and uncomfortable.

Though our heroes, this time around, are played by the ever-genial Chevy Chase and by an oddly lackluster actress named Madolyn Smith, *Funny Farm* is pretty much a "Green Acres" retread. If Manhattan-lawyer-turned-gentleman-farmer Eddie Albert had to climb up a telephone pole every time he wanted to place a call from his Hooterville hovel, so Chevy Chase—in the role of Andy Farmer, a sometime Upper West Side sportswriter who has retired to the countryside with his wife, Elizabeth, to write his first novel—must get used to feeding quarters into the public phone which has inexplicably been installed in his kitchen.

Jeffrey Boam's screenplay, then, is exceedingly derivative. What's more, it's very episodic, moving from gag to gag with all the shamelessness of a Henny Youngman. Plot doesn't count for much here, nor does character: Boam takes the Farmers and their feelings no

*Bruce Bawer is The American Spectator's movie reviewer.*

more seriously than the writer of a Road Runner cartoon takes a fall from a cliff by Wile E. Coyote; it doesn't seem to occur to him not to have Andy or Elizabeth do something funny (e.g., hit a dog over the head with a frying pan) simply because it would be out of character. If the center of the story keeps shifting, moreover, it's apparently for no other reason than that Boam, at various junctures, happened to come up with boffo plot twists that had little or nothing to do with the direction the story happened to be taking theretofore. Even the broadest of movie farces generally operates by stricter rules than this.

If *Funny Farm* nonetheless has its moments—inspired, original, wonderfully loony moments—the main reason may be stated in three words: George Roy Hill. In fact, this film is something of a textbook lesson in the difference that a top-notch director can make to a basically feeble screenplay. Throughout the movie, you can feel the wit of the director working its magic upon the witless material. To be fair, some of Boam's inventions (e.g., a scene involving an order of lamb fries) would likely be amusing even in the hands of a Carl Reiner; but the majority of them (e.g., the world's one-millionth Dutch-door gag) are funny and memorable primarily because of the way Hill visualizes and times them. Of course, the director of *The World According to Garp* shouldn't be wasting his time on such mediocre fare in the first place—but that's another story.

Like *Funny Farm*, *Big Business* tries to find humor in the contrast between city and country. Try to follow this: forty-odd years ago, in Jupiter Hollow, West Virginia, a dirt-poor local woman named Ratliff and a rich Manhattanite named Shelton are both delivered of twin daughters named Rose and Sadie; a befuddled nurse switches two of the infants, so that each mother unwittingly goes home with one baby that's hers and one that isn't. Cut to the present: in Manhattan,

Sadie Shelton (Bette Midler) is the brassy, obnoxious chief executive officer of her family's huge conglomerate, the Moramax Corporation; her meek, friendly "sister" Rose (Lily Tomlin), who's never felt quite at home in New York or in the corporate world, is more interested in collecting stray dogs than in her role as the firm's v.p. Things are the other way around down in Jupiter Hollow: there Rose Ratliff (Lily Tomlin) is a take-charge type, at harmony with her surroundings, while her "sister" Sadie Ratliff (Bette Midler) feels out of place and aches to see the big city. Sadie's opportunity comes when her urban namesake decides to sell off one of Moramax's smaller holdings, the Hollowmade Furniture Company in Jupiter Hollow. Since Hollowmade is the burg's chief industry, Rose Ratliff is deeply concerned about Moramax's plans; with Sadie in tow, she travels to New York on the eve of Moramax's big

stockholders' meeting to seek assurances that Hollowmade will not be closed down following the sale.

If the opening sequences sound clumsily expository, they are. The purpose of these sequences, needless to say, is as simple as the sequences themselves are complicated: to place twin Lilys and twin Betties in adjoining hotel suites, unaware of each other's existence, and set them loose on an increasingly confused supporting

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