

Hitting the Phantom Curve

by Donald G. Smith

My son developed an interest in sports at an early age. As I recall, he was throwing a ball in the playpen while ignoring his stuffed animals. A born competitor, he grew up seeing me as a batting practice pitcher and punt return man as much as a father, and our blood bond was forged in the fires of competition.

A most important plank in our relationship evolved from the phantom curve, a rather clever bit of chicanery that I sold to him as the “unhittable pitch.” I had used it in my playing days with the Dakota All-Stars, but only sparingly because I was acutely aware that this weapon could ruin the game of baseball. I jealously guarded my awesome secret and refused to teach the pitch to anyone else. As a player I had used it only in crucial situations and threw it no more than three or four times a game. As the story went, no batter ever came close to hitting the phantom curve.

As I said, my son was a competitor, and he was determined to hit the unhittable pitch, but of course he never did. When he hit the ball, he would look hopefully at me and ask if that was the phantom curve. The answer was always negative, but when he swung and missed, we had a different story. *That* was the phantom curve.

He was about eight when he finally saw through the whole charade, realizing that he couldn't win because I was calling the shots. I alone decided what was, and what was not, this remarkable pitch.

Mr. Smith is a writer living in Santa Maria, California. He has been a frequent contributor to The Wall Street Journal.

The whole thing was rigged, and he was the victim of a bit of deceit from a man with questionable pitching skills and an active imagination.

I recalled the phantom curve recently when I heard yet another speaker castigating the federal government for its “inadequate efforts” in dealing with AIDS and the homeless problem. The simple truth is that efforts to date have been far too ambitious because neither matter is the government's business, but that is another issue. The point to be addressed here is in the area of problem solving. The speaker, and all people of like mind, see the federal government as a problem-solving institution, a place in which bureaus and departments are established to deal with social problems. Then, presumably, the problems go away and humanity takes a giant step forward.

It is another case of the phantom-curve deception because the whole thing is rigged from the outset and no batter will ever make contact. People who are awarded desirable government jobs, with all attendant perks, don't work their jobs out of existence. This is a universal law of human nature and shouldn't be all that difficult to comprehend. These people don't solve; they regulate. Solution is terminal, and regulation is forever.

This is not intended as a put-down of government workers, because they are human and they react as humans react. Not being entirely pure of heart, I would do the same thing if given a plush office with commensurate salary, medical coverage, a fat pension plan, a government car, and all kinds of business to conduct in Paris and the



SUNRISE/TRINITY PHOTOS

Bahamas. The problem is not the people, but the system—a system that makes problem-solving the kiss of death and problem-perpetuation a one-way ticket to the good life.

This is something that our self-appointed humanitarians don't understand. Government doesn't cure diseases, and it doesn't make the indigent disappear. It doesn't make the deserts bloom, the blind see, nor the lame walk. This is not why we have government.

It is interesting to note that since Lyndon Johnson offered to cure all our social ills with the Great Society, we have spent more than a trillion dollars trying to turn the federal government into the Magic Kingdom, and it hasn't even come close to working. We have added five cabinet-level depart-

ments, all devoted to some kind of social betterment, and this has resulted in nothing more than jobs for people who regulate this massive wheel-spinning operation.

All of this leads us back to the phantom curve, the unhittable pitch. Whenever I hear of a new Federal agency created to solve a social problem, I think of a seven-year-old boy, digging in at the plate and mustering all his skills and determination to do something that couldn't be done, simply because the man who controlled the game wouldn't let it be done. There is, however, one major difference. The little boy figured it out and went on to more constructive things. People who should know better are still up there swinging a bat. □

Biblical Roots of American Liberty

by Edmund A. Opitz

The First Amendment to the Constitution forbids Congress to set up an official church; there was to be no “Church of the United States” as a branch of this country’s government. Such an alliance between Church and State is what “establishment” means. An established church is a politico-ecclesiastical structure that receives support from tax monies, advances its program by political means, and penalizes dissent. Our Constitution renounces such arrangements *in toto*; the Founders wrote the First Amendment into the Constitution to prevent them.

The famed American jurist Joseph Story, who served on the Supreme Court from 1811 till 1845, and is noted for his great *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States*, had this to say about the First Amendment: “The real object of the Amendment was, not to countenance, much less advance Mahometanism, or Judaism, or infidelity, by prostrating Christianity; but to exclude all rivalry among Christian sects, and to prevent any *national* ecclesiastical establishment, which should give to an hierarchy the exclusive patronage of the national government.”

The various theologies, doctrines, and creeds found in this country can thus be advanced by religious means only—by reason, persuasion, and example. Separation of Church and State means that government maintains a neutral stance toward our three biblically based religions—

Catholicism, Judaism, and Protestantism, as well as toward the various denominations and splinter groups. These several religious bodies, then, have no alternative but to compete for converts in the marketplace of ideas. This is a good arrangement, good for both Church and State; it avoids the twin evils of a politicized religion and a divinized politics.

A Christian Nation

It has often been observed that America is a Christian nation—around which observation several misunderstandings cluster. We are a Christian nation in the sense that our understanding of human nature and destiny, the purpose of individual life, our convictions about right and wrong, our norms, emerged out of the religion of Christendom—not out of Buddhism, Confucianism, or primitive animism. And it is a fact of history that our forebears whose religious convictions brought them to these shores in the 17th and 18th centuries sought to create in this new world a biblically based Christian commonwealth. But it was not to be a theocracy—of which the world had seen too many! It was to be a religious society, but one which incorporated a *secular* political order!

The reasoning ran something like this. The human person is forever; each man and woman lives in the here and now, and also in the hereafter. Here, we are pilgrims for three score years and ten, more or less. Life here is vitally important for it’s a test run for life hereafter. Earth is the training ground for life eternal. Such training is the essence

The Reverend Mr. Opitz is a member of the staff of The Foundation for Economic Education and is the author of the book Religion and Capitalism: Allies, Not Enemies.