

de that our tort system is responsible for some, if not of the escalating healthcare costs about which he protests so achingly.

malpractice awards, many of them perfectly unjustified, about \$20–40 billion a year. The insurance premiums that doctors are forced to pay in order to protect themselves in the event of a lawsuit are astronomical — often in the range of \$300,000 per doctor per physician. The result is higher charges for patients and less compensation for physicians' employees. When Dr. John Edwards wins hundreds of millions by convincing a jury that not giving an expectant mother an early abortion caused autism in the infant, we need to remember that the money such people get and spend comes from the pockets of the healthcare system.

Doctors, in order to guard themselves against the onslaught of frivolous lawsuits, doctors have to practice "defensive medicine" — ordering every conceivable test and procedure, even when the nature of a patient's ailment is clear, so that no lawyer can accuse anyone of having overlooked anything. The costs of defensive medicine are hard to calculate, but a recent estimate by the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons puts the cost between \$100 and \$178 billion per year — all pure waste that drives up costs.

Until recently, Obama has uttered not a squeak about tort reform. Finally, in his major speech before Congress, he made a statement indicating that he would be "open" to it. But this stage Obama: faced with a major criticism, feigns openness to it by uttering a few vague promises, and then later justifies what you said. In ordinary life, this is called lying.

The examples are endless. The president promised to support offshore drilling and nuclear power, but that was a lie. He promised not to hire lobbyists, but that was also a lie. He promised to end pork-barrel spending, but that was a massive lie. He promised to cut a dollar in spending for every dollar spent in new programs, but that was a grotesque lie. He promised bipartisanship and transparency in government, but that was an insane lie.

Obama has bashed doctors plenty, insinuating that they do nothing to prevent a person from developing diabetes because that might keep them from being able to earn money by cutting off a leg. But he has nary a critical word to say about lawyers. Could that be because he is himself a lawyer? Or could it be because the biggest source of funding for Obama and his party is the trial lawyers of America?

— Gary Jason

the impotence! — How could such an alleged smart group as libertarians take a winning philosophy and turn it into a total loser in every presidential election?

Libertarian philosophy — which is, in broad terms, ecologically conservative and socially liberal — has significant support. Surveys by Rasmussen and the Cato Institute found, respectively, that 16% and 15% of respondents basically libertarian views on key issues. Gallup only puts the number at 20%. Either way, that's enough to decide presidential elections.

The number might well be double those percentages if libertarian ideas were more effectively defined, promoted, organized, and mobilized, especially during presidential campaigns when people are paying attention.

Instead, libertarians sideline themselves and waste millions in time and money by running their own presidential candidates, who get next to nothing at the polls. For the average person, what was the message about libertarianism in 2008 when Libertarian Party candidate Bob Barr received less than half of one percent of the popular vote, 214,789 fewer votes than perennial gadfly Ralph Nader?

Barr could have received a percentage that was 16 times higher and still have ended up with fewer people than those who think that Elvis might be making a comeback tour. (Eight percent of respondents in a 2002 FOX News/Opinion Dynamics poll said they believed there's a chance that Elvis is still alive. Another 11% said they weren't sure.)

Libertarians would do better if they called a convention to develop positions on a dozen key issues. In both the presidential primaries and the general election, candidates of the two major parties could then be rated on those positions and subsequently endorsed or rejected. Past voting records of candidates could also be evaluated and publicized, rated against libertarian positions.

That's how libertarians can become key players — by determining winners, by making it clear that they're a significant percentage of the voting public, a powerful voting bloc, not a four-tenths-of-1% fringe group.

— Ralph Reiland

Pen and tell — Washington was all a-flutter in mid-August as news surfaced that Dick Cheney would be writing a "tell-all" about his time in the Executive Office. "Will he be critical of Bush?" people wonder.

I'm not particularly interested in reading this book, but I do look forward to his next anticipated project, when he'll write Bush's "tell-all" memoir.

— Ross Levatter

The best syndicated medicine — I've lately taken to reading Ron Hart, an up-and-coming humorist whose weekly columns are hilarious and shrewd, loosed as they are from the moorings of political correctness and other orthodoxies. Whiling away the hours on Saturday or Sunday mornings, I'll browse the archives at Ron's website and delight in the deliciously derisive prose, an inventive troping of Mark Twain, H.L. Mencken, Lewis Grizzard, and P.J. O'Rourke (whom Ron dubs his hero).

They're like temporary holidays, these weekend reading sessions, for Ron's commentaries froth with playful irreverence. He referred to the Oval Office as the "Oral Office" during the Clinton administration, and claimed that George W. Bush, during the final years of his presidency, was so weakened by missteps and hubris that he couldn't pass a bill giving away free ice cream on the Fourth of July.

Ron deftly neutralizes stinging comments with a light-hearted tone; he delivers punch lines quickly and often subtly, as when he submits that Obama's teleprompter fell over from exhaustion, or when he declares, "I don't know if you have heard yet because the media is really playing it down, but entertainment icon Michael Jackson died recently."

One evening last summer, in the downtown library of West Virginia University, I came across a lady who seemed engrossed in some article that was taking up her computer screen. Having heard her chuckle intermittently for several minutes, I decided to peer over her shoulder.

"Excuse me," I interrupted, "that wouldn't be . . ."

"Ron Hart," she supplied.

"Yes, I *know* him."

"Oh, really?" she said. "I just lost my job a week ago and haven't laughed until now. This guy's hysterical."

"You're kidding me," I said. "How do *you* know Ron Hart?" (I had assumed that Ron's reputation was purely regional.)

"Don't *all* libertarians?" she retorted. And I made a new friend that day.

Southern by birth, libertarian by the grace of God, Ron is something of an oddity. An independently wealthy man — part private investor, part stock analyst — he's also a redneck rascal at heart who very probably sports a "Don't Tread on Me" tattoo, or at least wishes he did. His prose is hardly high-brow (unlike his outfits). But that's what makes it good. "I have found that pretentious people tend to read trendy, big and eclectic books," Ron once grumbled, "and the annoying thing is they like to tell you about it."

Ron's columns, though sarcastic and satirical, aren't *all* fun and games: they draw their lexicon of intelligibility from classical liberal philosophy. Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, Ayn Rand, Friedrich Hayek — these are just some of the folks Ron regularly cites. "Hundreds of my readers have emailed me asking why I am a Libertarian and to define it," he wrote in 2005, adding in self-deprecating fashion that "by hundreds I mean about 12." His lengthy response to these 12 is significant. Jokes aside, his response amounts to this telling line: "We Libertarians want simplicity, common sense and the right to decide for ourselves (based on our religious, cognitive, personal conclusions) how we should lead our own lives."

It's well worth the time to visit Ron's website and read his columns for yourself. As Mark Twain remarked, "The human race has only one really effective weapon and that is laughter." — Allen Mendenhall

Irving Kristol, R.I.P. — Irving Kristol died on September 18. I have old notebooks of clippings from the time when I used to read the editorial pages of *The Wall Street Journal* every day. I liked Kristol's style and much of his thinking, and still have some of his pieces, replete with underlines. Here, for example, is Kristol on Aug. 12, 1976:

In politics the language we use to ask questions is always more important than any particular answer.

This is a piece about "social justice" — a term Kristol keeps in antiseptic quotation marks. In the piece he writes:

The distribution of income under liberal capitalism is "fair" if — and only if — you think that liberty is, or ought to be, the most important political value. If not, then not. The distribution of income under capitalism is an expression of the general belief that it is better for society to be shaped by the interplay of people's free opinions and free preferences than by the enforcement of any one set of values by government.

I thought that was a perceptive statement. Fairness depends on what your values are.

Another quotation from two decades later, Dec. 18, 1997:

The state cannot and should not be a risk-taking institution, since it is politically impossible for any state to cope with the inevitable bankruptcies associated with economic risk taking.

During the late 1970s and early '80s, Kristol promoted the tax-cutting, supply-side current in the Republican Party. After

the initial election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, he wrote this call to radicalism:

Administration is only a part of government. In periods of stability it may even be the most important part. At moments of radical change, however, it is the political-entrepreneurial aspect of government that must be dominant. At such moments, the guiding idea of leadership ought to be, not, "Manage it" but — to borrow a slogan of the 1960s — "Do it!" Cut tax rates; cut unnecessary spending; attack the regulatory establishment . . .

You can argue about what the Reagan administration did with that opportunity. Kristol thought Reagan did far too little with it. He thought the old Republicans in the Senate and House in the early '80s were timid compromisers, and that the only hope was with the young ones. In a column run on January 4, 1983, he reminded them that back in the 1930s, the New Dealers in Congress "prevailed in the end by being determined, factional and 'divisive.'" That advice the House Republicans heeded a decade later.

Here, on Feb. 2, 1998, Kristol predicts that Europe "will be increasingly 'statist' — not 'socialist' or 'collectivist', just 'statist,'" and that unemployment of 10% and more will be tolerated for long periods. He adds: "Bankers never do feel that unemployment is their problem. Neither, in Europe, do trade union leaders."

Kristol was perceptive. He was sensitive to political changes, and called some of them early. He wrote with style and maturity. He had good advice for his friends. I didn't agree with everything he wrote, and never understood why anyone would expect that.

— Bruce Ramsey

Norman Borlaug, R.I.P. — A prophet is seldom honored in his own country, especially when his actions offend the regnant religious worldview. So I cannot help but note the passing of Norman Borlaug on September 12, at age 95, and accord him some honor. He was a man I deeply admired.

Borlaug, agricultural scientist extraordinaire, was born in 1914 in a small Iowa town, attended a tiny public school, and grew up on his father's farm. He barely got into the University of Minnesota, being assisted by his high school wrestling and other athletic achievements. He majored in forestry, receiving his B.S. in 1937. After a brief stint in the forestry service, he returned to the University of Minnesota as a grad student, receiving an M.S. in 1939 and a Ph.D. in 1942, both in plant pathology.

He put in several years of research with the du Pont de Nemours Foundation, where he worked on bactericides and fungicides for agricultural use. In 1944, he was selected by the Rockefeller Foundation to work as a geneticist and plant pathologist, organizing and directing a joint project with the Mexican government to find a way to fight a devastating form of wheat fungus. He helped set up the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center, training young scientists for continuous improvement in crop yields. In large part thanks to him, Mexico became a net wheat exporter in 1963.

His formidable basket of attributes — tenacity in research, pragmatic philosophy of science, and willingness to work generously with others and to train indigenous scientists to carry on the work — served him and all the organizations he worked for well.