

Serfing U.S.A.

Americans are conditioned to lick the hand that beats them.

By Reid Buckley

TAKE A SIMPLE PROPOSITION: anything government messes with gets messed up worse. This was the basic insight of Philadelphia, briefly revived by Ronald Reagan. Pollster Scott Rasmussen finds that by a 2-1 margin, American voters agree that no matter how bad things are, Congress can always make them worse. Go around the globe and ask whether anyone believes that government works. You will hear yes only from folk who stand to gain from the state—contractors, pensioners, bureaucrats, and officeholders.

Think Katrina. The terrifying winds, deluges drumming down unceasingly, the ocean bursting dikes to drown a city—these are not the images that spring to mind. These are the *sturm und drang* common to all big blows. They do not shout, “Katrina!” What springs to mind with that cry are those 11,000 trailer-homes sitting uselessly in a field in Arkansas while thousands of people in New Orleans went without shelter. The ruling evocative image is not the ferocity of the storm; it is the bumbling incompetence of government.

When will it dawn on our intelligentsia that the world is properly apprehended by poetry, not didacticism? Ask e.e. cummings, what is spring? Spring is mudluscious and puddlewonderful. Ask Bill Shakespeare, what’s love? His answer: Sonnet 29—“Haply I think on thee, and then my state,/ Like to the lark at break of day arising/ From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate.” It is the evocative image seizing upon and possessing the imagination that—out of the whirling billions of images our neurons are capable of receiving all at

once, dizzyingly, like exploding galaxies—sifts the welter for us and catches reality, if only by the toe. (Sufficient victory!) Those trailer-homes defined the lessons of Katrina: the stupidity and inefficacy of government.

Just four years after that hurricane, we were slammed by a financial crisis that diagnostically—all apart from Wall Street greed and obscene executive salaries—was caused by government: by that spittle-spraying Barney Frank egging Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac into promiscuously churning out mortgages to people who could not afford them. That’s the illuminating face of the collapse: Barney Frank manipulating the public purse for ideological ends.

The White House and its rubber-stamp Congress rammed through a “stimulus” package costing zillions of dollars, vastly expanding government spending on pet projects but doing little to resuscitate the credit-famished private sector. Franklin Roosevelt tried much the same remedies during the 1930s, and they failed; they only worsened the Depression. That this is an historically unassailable judgment does not matter to the lobotomized knights errant of our liberal-arts education. Recent experience does not matter either: Japan’s economy continued in the doldrums and the ruling party fell. But the boys in power here are smarter than the lessons of the past.

Never mind that we are committing fiscal lunacy, condemning the nation either to bankruptcy or ever stiffening taxation draining energy from the economy in mortal doses. If present demo-

graphic trends continue, an ever diminishing productive sector will be called upon to support an ever expanding geriatric ward. But don’t do the math. Zeal is important; adherence to doctrinaire authoritarian nostrums is what counts. Government spending, government meddling, expanded and ever more invasive government is the sovereign remedy for all ills, jock itch and herpes included.

Our deaf-and-dumb left-wing activists are being yanked along by the snout of their blind faith in government. That brought us the futile War on Drugs, a federally directed effort that not only has failed to reduce consumption of toxic substances at home but now promotes civil war in Mexico; brought us the Department of Energy that in all its multi-hundreds of millions of dollars of spending has yet to produce a kinetic flaring of the imagination or by as little as one dollar per barrel prevent OPEC from extorting the world economy; brought us the Department of Education, which since Jimmy Carter has achieved a 30 percent drop-out rate among high-schoolers and sent test scores lower than Latvia’s. Let’s for pity’s sake not get into the Army Corps of Engineers. Nor into the department of highways and byways and related asphalt screw-ups whose chief business seems to be naming stretches of interstate after otherwise nameless grubs in Congress. I won’t mention Amtrak. Nor the Post Office. Government bails out General Motors using billions of dollars it does not have, cans its president, bilks its bondholders, ends up assuming possession of the company in partnership

disasters of a different kind—the sort perpetuated by banks and real estate scams. Consider Dubai.

Driven not only by oil wealth but by a much-hyped investment boom, this tiny Gulf emirate poured billions into the ultramodern equivalent of fairytale castles: an indoor ski range (in a locale that averages 90 degrees), the world's tallest building, and an archipelago of artificial islands built to resemble a map of the world. To many Middle Easterners and Westerners, this former pearl-fishing village was the wave of the future, a bastion of progress in a part of the world hitherto immune to modernity. Its openness to the world and to the world's money were widely hailed as a model for the Mideast.

But in November, the bubble burst, as Dubai World, the state-owned holding company involved in much of the construction boom, announced it could no longer service its debt. The company brought the country to its knees—almost literally, as Dubai was reduced to begging for a bailout. Abu Dhabi rode to the rescue, but as with America's rescued banks, it's far from clear whether Dubai's troubles are over.

The Gulf emirates have been blessed with much natural wealth, but sought to improve their bounty through the magic of financialization. America's economic idealism proved almost as disastrous for Dubai as our military idealism has proved for other developing states. We in the West, no less than the sheikhs of Dubai, might do well to reconsider the creed of infinite progress—of turning desert sands into Disneyland.