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## **COLLEGES and UNIVERSITIES**

### **Some Questions; Some Answers**

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**Q Wait a minute! What's going on? Why are there two of us up here?**

**A** Since this is the only time of the year when ladies are invited to Chit-Chat evenings, I thought it appropriate to share the podium tonight, if only in part.

**Q In part?**

**A** You can ask the questions and I shall try to suggest some answers. It will be a sort of dialogue.

**Q About what?**

**A** Higher education - colleges and universities. It is a very broad subject, of course and virtually everyone present here tonight is likely as familiar with it as we are. There are many different types of Chit-Chat presentation, though broadly speaking, they fall into two categories. One is to examine a narrow subject intensively. This method is the more didactic. The objective is to impart information on an unfamiliar topic.

The other is to take a wide subject and take a few little bites out of it. That will be our objective this evening. The audience will not learn as much, but can draw from the well of its own experience to enrich the subsequent exchange. In casting a thin net over familiar terrain we shall attempt to be a bit provocative, hoping thereby to prompt some lively commentary.

**Q Where do we begin?**

**A** I saw an odd reference recently, though only tangentially related to our subject, it may serve as an appropriate way to lead into it. Sir Ernest Gower in his 1965 revision of Henry Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, listed words whose meaning had gained a new stigma within the past generation. Among what he called "worsened words" were "collaborator", "colonialism", and "appeasement". Also on the list was "academic".

Gower indicated that the word "academic" had become devalued because while it used to mean "scholarly", now it was reduced to meaning "conventional, formalistic, or commonplace". Gower was talking semantically, of course, but I would contend that the semantic difference reflects the diminished way in which people now view the university.

**Q You believe that a diminished meaning for the word "academic" is a metaphor for a diminished view of the university itself?**

**A** I do. The university used to be seen as a center of scholarship, of ideas. The Latin word *academicus* referred initially to the place where Plato taught, a venue for higher learning. One hundred and fifty years ago, John Henry Newman defined "university" as "a place for the communication and circulation of thought". [1] That has certainly changed. Universities have turned into huge and complex corporate entities - impersonal institutions run by ornate bureaucracies. As one faculty member confessed, professors "once portrayed affectionately in fiction and film as bumbling bookworms" are today "more likely to be seen as jet-setting self-promoters". [2]

**Q Why? What has brought this about?**

**A** Size. In 1900 less than two percent of youths of graduating age received bachelors degrees. Now over half of American high school graduates go on to college. Higher education has become so huge an enterprise that scholarship of a serious nature is, at best, difficult to sustain, and at worst, is marginalized or non-

existent.

**Q Do that large a number really need to attend college?**

**A** Colleges and universities have taken on the burden that high schools used to carry. ACT (one of the principal admissions testing services) reported a couple of years ago that only about half of high school graduates have the reading skills needed to do college work. Even fewer are prepared for college level science and math courses. [3] It's not just the high school's fault; much of the blame belongs to unconcerned parents and the culture at large. Kids spend their time watching TV or playing computer games rather than doing homework.

**Q What happens to these unprepared kids?**

**A** Many don't make it. Others struggle and just barely get by. According to ACT, less than forty percent of those who enter public four year colleges finish in five years or less. Those who enter private colleges do somewhat better - about 57 percent finish in five years or less. The record in two year colleges is dismal - less than 30% who enter finish. [4]

**Q The colleges must have had to expand to handle these numbers.**

**A** Hugely. In Boston, for example, MIT has just built a \$300 million complex with buildings designed by Frank Gehry. It is only a part of a one billion dollar expansion program. Across the Charles river in Allston, Harvard is planning a brand new campus on the 200 acres it owns there. [5] Boston is hardly alone. Take Arizona State University. It has grown by 15,000 students (to 64,000) in the last seven years and is planning to expand to 90,00. There are over 25,341 parking places but students find it hard to get one. [6]

Tiny community colleges are growing fast as well. They now enroll nearly half of all undergraduates: over six million students. California alone has 109 community college campuses. [7] To some extent the community colleges and some

regional public universities have taken over the work high schools used to manage: teaching minimal basics and preparing students for jobs.

**Q Overall, universities have had to water down academic standards, I suppose, to dumb down, so to speak.**

**A** Big is seldom better. A university with 50,000 students can't maintain the uniformly high quality that a college of 1500 can. Resources, particularly in the huge public universities, are not keeping pace with growth. In the California system, both class size and tuition have risen. In many cases, students are unable to sign up for the courses they need to graduate. For-profit universities have sprung up to fill some of the demand, but their standards are problematic. The largest and possibly the worst is the University of Phoenix. It has 300,000 students on campuses in 39 states and online.

**Q Why do you say it may be the worst?**

**A** It has to provide a decent level of return to investors, which means that it has to keep its overhead down. Ninety-five percent of its instructors are part-time. More seriously, the Department of Education has accused it of fraudulently obtaining millions of dollars in financial aid. Other for-profit universities are alleged to be guilty of similar practices. [8]

**Q Obviously, if a university is suspected of illegal practices governmental authorities should step in. But what about academic freedom? Doesn't that guarantee some degree of protection from outside interference?**

**A** Certainly, it can and should, but it does so largely in theory. A leading scholar on the subject states it this way: "There has been no adequate analysis of what academic freedom the Constitution protects or why it protects it. Lacking definition or guiding principles, the doctrine floats in law, picking up decisions as a hull does barnacles". [9]

**Q Then academic freedom doesn't necessarily embrace freedom of speech?**

A Clearly not always. It would be a good question to ask Larry Summers. As most everyone surely recalls, he was pressured to resign as president of Harvard. He caused a furor simply by *asking* whether women had the same innate talent in the sciences as men. More recently, Summers was invited to speak at UC Davis, but was disinvited after women faculty members protested.

A similar thing happened recently at Stanford, when the Hoover Institution sought to appoint Donald Rumsfeld a visiting fellow. Thousands of students and faculty demonstrated and circulated petitions. It seems bizarre in a democracy to deny entrance to a place of learning to someone because you dislike his views. Sadly, it appears to be a regular occurrence.

**Q University speech codes are often subject to ridicule. I gather some even prohibit jokes.**

A True. These codes are usually quite silly and deserving of ridicule. Here is one quite typical example: Ohio State University instructs students as follows: "Do not joke about differences related to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, ability, socioeconomic background, etc." Restrictions on speech of this sort are in place in almost every university.

**Q Would dumb-blond jokes be included in that ?**

A They might well be risky.

**Q All right, so academic freedom doesn't open the gates to politically unpopular individuals or to free expression. That doesn't mean the concept is not valid and worth defending.**

A True. Unfortunately, the phrase often serves only as a red herring.

**Q Meaning?**

**A** Meaning as a distraction to hide maladroit administration or to protect an incompetent or troublesome member of the faculty. There is a tradition of college autonomy. While a worthy tradition in theory, it enables entrenched faculties and administrators to fend off outside efforts to gage their effectiveness. Attempts by state legislatures to administer what are referred to as “core learning outcome tests” have not progressed far. There is little open scrutiny.

**Q Is oversight any better in private colleges and universities?**

**A** Not really. Governing boards, trustees, alumni councils, and the like tend to be *de facto* extensions of university administrations. They owe their positions to the university, rather than the other way around. Accountability is often quite inadequate. Derek Bok, who was president of Harvard for two decades, and is thus a first rate witness, has written that “the prospects of turning colleges into effective learning organizations” are “not good” because “important faculty interests” stand in the way. [10]

**Q How does one know if a college is an “effective learning organization”?**

**A** It is not easy. Essentially, there is no way for students - or their parents who are footing the bills - to judge whether they have gotten their money’s worth. Nor is there an easy way to tell whether after four undergraduate years the student is what might properly be called “educated”.

**Q What Derek Bok calls “important faculty interests” are responsible?**

**A** Well, that might be overstating the matter. But there is no question that a basic liberal education has changed dramatically over the years, with faculty interests and biases heavily involved. The influence European philosophers, particularly

French post-structuralists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, have had an impact on American curricula and teaching is a matter of controversy. Clearly, there has been an impact. The underlying canon contends that all value systems are relative. No political or cultural principles can be affirmed as being superior to any other. As a result, few colleges still require a core curriculum highlighting the history, literature and traditions of Western culture. Language requirements are also out, despite the fact that globalization makes them more necessary than ever.

**Q The stress is on multiculturalism?**

**A** Yes. Of course, learning about other societies is legitimate and desirable. But there is another, more insidious, pressure: that is, for courses of a doctrinal rather than a scholarly nature. That, or to advance the interests of a particular subgroup. UC Santa Cruz, for example, has a "Department of Feminist Studies". Other universities have departments with titles such as "Peace Studies", "Post-Colonial Studies" or "Chicano Studies". [11] The classroom is used not, as it should be, for the impartial advancement of knowledge but to instill a political ideology. The purpose is indoctrination rather than a dispassionate examination of issues.

**Q This can result in some outlandish courses, can it not?**

**A** Some are exceedingly odd. The University of Massachusetts has a course called "The Social Construction of Whiteness and Women"; UCLA has one named "The Cultural History of Rap"; at Vassar you can take a course in "Black Marxism"; at Harvard you can enroll in "Genealogies of Queer Theory".

**Q I suppose "faculty interests" also include handling a minimal amount of course work. At Williams College, where my grandson is a senior, a third of the professors are on leave at any given time.**

**A** That is not atypical. In addition, university bureaucracies are growing at a faster rate than faculties. There are 75 individuals engaged in fund raising or alumni affairs at Williams, *twice* the number teaching history, philosophy and romance

languages combined. [12] Burgeoning bureaucracies usually translate into inferior management.

**Q Wasn't that why the president of the University of California system was forced to resign recently?**

A That would be Robert Dynes. Richard Blum, the chairman of the Board of Regents (and also Diane Feinstein's husband) said the Regents were fed up with what he called a "dysfunctional set of organizational structures, processes and policies". [13]

**Q There were also accusations of corruption, were there not?**

A Dynes was criticized for UC's practice of handing out hidden perks and bonuses to top executives. [14] Unfortunately, cases of corruption within university bureaucracies are not as rare as one would wish or expect. There have been numerous reports during this past year of college administrators receiving kickbacks from student loan companies. Gifts or payments to college financial aid officials in return for pushing lenders are not uncommon.

A similar practice has involved foreign study programs. Private companies have been offering college officials bribes to sign up students. According to the *New York Times* offers have included "cash bonuses and commissions on student-paid fees." [15]

**Q You haven't mentioned conflict of interest allegations about university officials who sit on corporate boards.**

A University presidents or other senior administrators who sit on corporate boards are paid significant amounts of money. The potential for conflicts of interest is clear. There is also the obvious point that they should be concentrating on university rather than corporate matters.



**Q It's not as if they are underpaid, is it?**

A Hardly. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that in 2006, 112 college presidents had salaries exceeding half a million dollars. Five received more than a million. The compensation they receive for sitting on corporate boards supplements, or even tops, that for many.

Shirley Tilghman, president of Princeton, receives an annual salary and benefits amounting to almost \$600,000. Last year she earned an additional \$1.9 million for serving on corporate boards. Vanderbilt's president Gordon Gee receives a salary and benefits of over a million dollars, supplemented by another half million from sitting on boards. [16]

The man making the most money of all is John Hennessy, president of Stanford. I quote *The Wall Street Journal*: "In the past five years, through exclusive investments and relationships with companies, Mr. Hennessy has collected fees, stock and paper stock-option profits totaling \$43 million, securities filings show. That dwarfs his \$616,000 annual compensation at Stanford, where he has been president since 2000". [17]

**Q If college presidents are earning that sort of money, no wonder tuition fees are as staggering as they are.**

A There is little question about that! College costs have risen far faster than the rate of inflation. Universities such as Harvard or Stanford now charge almost *three times* as much in *constant dollars* as they did in 1975. [18] Tuition plus room and board at top universities has now reached \$45,000. That is not much below U.S. median *family income* which was \$48,200 last year according to Census Bureau figures. [19]

**Q All right, but scholarship money is available.**

A The wealthier schools do have plenty of scholarship money, but even the

richest expect at least half of their students to pay the full amount. The cost at public universities, though obviously less, is still substantial for kids from middle class backgrounds. UC Berkeley costs about \$25, 000; San Francisco State about \$20, 000.

**Q A lot of students go into debt.**

**A** Yes. Student debt has risen at an even faster rate than tuition. About 35% of undergraduates and 42% of graduate students go into debt. [20] Private student loans (those not guaranteed by the Federal government) totaled over \$17 billion in the last academic year. In the same period students and their families borrowed almost \$60 billion in federally guaranteed loans. [21]

**Q That represents a terrible burden for young people.**

**A** It often stays with them for years.

**Q Are these huge tuition fees really justifiable?**

**A** Some expenses appear justifiable, others appear dubious and quite a number appear wasteful. Increases in faculty salaries are deserved for the most part, even though full professors often spend little time actually teaching. A full professor at Yale now earns over \$150,000; at Berkeley over \$130,000. [22] The more wasteful forms of spending are too numerous to list. The most obvious is the endless construction of unnecessary and ostentatious buildings, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the “edifice complex”.

A *Standard & Poor's* report that came out last year called the university construction boom an “arms race”. *College Planning & Management*, a trade publication, estimates that American colleges and universities completed \$15 billion worth of building last year and have proceeded at the same pace this year. [23] Maintaining these elaborate buildings is expensive. Most often they are named after the wealthy alumnus who donated the money. The donor gets his or her name

chiseled into the granite entrance.

**Q There are quite a few non-teaching personnel doing what might be called “hand holding”.**

**A** There are “wellness centers” and counselors of all types. Williams has offices dealing with “community engagement” and “experiential education” It has a “spouse/partner employment counselor” and a “baby-sitting coordinator”. There are also large public relations staffs, of course. [24]

**Q Is any of this related to laws about privacy and fear of law suits?**

**A** Some probably derives from that. Colleges and universities used to operate under the legal concept of *in loco parentis*, under which they essentially took on the responsibilities of parents. That changed in the 1960’s with court decisions giving students a variety of legal protections. Students are now legally considered adults at the age of 18. In 1974, Congress passed legislation forbidding universities from disclosing a student’s grades, disciplinary action or medical records. There are some exceptions, but schools are wary of being sued, either for not sufficiently protecting students’ privacy or for being overly protective. For example, MIT was sued by the parents of a student who committed suicide for failing to notify them of her emotional problems. [25]

**Q Still, a lot of frills have nothing to do with privacy or law suits.**

**A.** True. Most egregious are the luxury extras which colleges advertise to stay competitive in recruiting students: laundry services, rock climbing walls and even fancy restaurants. A pamphlet I got in the mail a while back from Hamilton College, my own *alma mater*, brags as follows: “With a half-dozen places to eat on campus and an endless number of food combinations, students at Hamilton really don’t have too much to complain about ... well, except maybe for the sushi line.”

**Q All this luxury doesn’t do much to promote scholarship, does it?**

**A** The monastic austerity practiced in earlier days worked better, I feel certain. Charles W. Eliot, who served as Harvard's president for forty years (from 1869 to 1909) used to say that "luxury and learning are ill bed fellows". [26]

**Q Do alumni donations and endowments help pay for all the frills?**

**A** Donations are huge and have doubled in every recent decade, reaching \$28 billion last year. Furthermore, private colleges and universities pay no taxes on tuition revenue or on endowment income. Harvard's \$35 billion endowment has been earning it \$5 billion annually. There are also complaints that wealthy donors buy admission for their offspring with gifts that are tax-deductible both to the college and themselves. [27]

**Q Alumni gifts often come with strings attached as well.**

**A** Many are tied to some specific wish of the donor, which can be a nuisance or a little weird. George Washington University in the District of Columbia was recently left a pet cemetery. After much internal debate it turned the gift down. [28]

In a more serious vein, the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, the graduate program from which I graduated in the 1950's, was given \$35 million in 1961, by the Robertson family, heirs to the A&P supermarket fortune. That was a lot of money in those days. The intent of the gift was for students to "prepare themselves for careers in public service", particularly in international relations. The intent could have not been more explicit, but Princeton largely ignored it and used the money for a variety of other purposes, some kept hidden from the family. In recent years, only 10% of Woodrow Wilson graduates have entered the sorts of jobs for which the money was intended.

The next generation of Robertsons is now suing the university to have the money returned. Bill Robertson, a Princeton graduate himself, has publicly described the Princeton administration as "really no better than your typical con artist". But

the suit is large and important and is worrying universities because if successful it could lead to litigation along the same lines elsewhere.

**Q I recall that in our day there were “town vs. gown” controversies.**

**A** The controversies are broader and more ideological now, with more at stake. The cultural and political attitudes of university bureaucracies and faculties commonly fall outside the society’s mainstream. Alumni, parents and students are often angry or resentful, but have little recourse for action. Academicians tend to regard themselves as a kind of Brahmin caste with views that are loftier and more virtuous than those of the barbarians beyond the gates. They are given to what might credibly be called messianic urges.

**Q Messianic urges?**

**A** They campaign for a more egalitarian society, through what is termed “redistributive liberalism”. Colleges, they believe, should be “engines of social mobility” as one Columbia professor put it. [29] In practice, that means giving an edge to those perceived as disadvantaged. In past decades the focus has largely been on African-Americans. More recently, the emphasis has shifted to low-income applicants, the idea being that class is as great an obstacle to advancement as race or ethnicity. In any event, these various drives are all subsumed under the heading of “diversity”.

**Q You’re opposed to diversity?**

**A** Not *per se*. But diversity is meaningless in isolation or without an appropriate context. It should come as a *by-product* of the educational process, not be an end in itself. The task of a college or university is to provide quality education, to impart knowledge, not to restructure or reconstitute the republic. That is not its job. No one has assigned it that mission. Ironically, the schools’ ideological agenda places them in a dilemma.

**Q How so?**

**A** They are concerned about their ratings. They scoff at the annual ratings produced by *U.S. News & World Report* or similar sources and pretend they are unreliable or worthless. But the reality is that high school seniors and their parents check them out, so universities are forced to pay attention. The ratings evaluate colleges on the ratio of applicants to the number accepted, their high school grades and test scores, the amount of alumni contributions, etc. Such factors militate against admitting poorly qualified applicants, many of whom come from high schools in poor or ghetto neighborhoods.

**Q How, then, do you achieve equal opportunity?**

**A** Colleges and universities are - or at least ought to be -meritocracies, citadels of scholarship and centers of intellectual excellence. Inequality is inherent in the very idea of a meritocracy. These institutions must attract the most talented and highly motivated. Assigning preferences to some groups over others undermines that goal. If some are favored on the basis of race, or class, or ethnicity, rather than strictly on merit, others better qualified unfairly lose out. Ultimately, the society loses out as well.

**Q Voters, state legislatures, and to some degree the courts, have tried to curb affirmative action, have they not?**

**A** Given the chance, voters have almost universally opposed affirmative action. California voters banned it in 1996 with Proposition 209. After the Supreme Court upheld affirmative action at the University of Michigan Law School in 2003, Michigan voters passed an initiative banning it. The universities have devoted great energy and creativity in working their way around these bans. They have used a variety of proxies for race: neighborhoods, socio-economic status, single-parent households, and the like.

A few have gone even further. According to the *New York Times*, a task

force at UCLA has been attempting to bring in minority students “without breaking the law - or at least without getting caught”. Peter Taylor, the leader of the task force was quoted as follows: “Exactly when you cross over into civil disobedience is not always clear. And I probably come down on the side of pushing the outer limits.” [30] Experts who have studied University of California admissions decisions have concluded that they clearly do break the law. Richard Sander, a UCLA law professor said that “UC factors race in.....There is no way to explain the disparities otherwise.” [31]

**Q You believe, then, that the admissions process should be colorblind?**

**A** Yes, and devoid of all this behind the scenes dodging and gimmickry. Take away the ideological component, and the admissions process becomes both fairer and simpler. Admit those best able to profit intellectually from what a university has to offer: the most gifted, the most energetic, the most motivated. They are the ones that should be brought in regardless of calculations as to ethnicity or background.

**Q As determined how? By tests?**

**A** In part. By SAT’s and their equivalent; by high school transcripts (though their usefulness has been undermined by grade inflation); by recommendations.

**Q Some of the most prestigious colleges are dropping the SAT’s.**

**A** The tests have been refined over time and predict performance with reasonable accuracy. Groups which perform poorly blame the tests rather than the test takers. The colleges oblige by shooting the messenger.

**Q** There are under-represented minorities but there are also (so called) over-represented minorities - Asians for example, who are highly motivated and competitive. If admissions are fair and colorblind you might wind up with a student body heavily weighted with particular minorities. Then what?

**A** Just as no one should be favored, so no one should be penalized for belonging to a particular group. Over-represented minorities are overwhelmingly urban and clustered in the Northeast and along the West Coast. If admissions are widely distributed across the nation, as they should properly be in any event, that minimizes the problem.

**Q** **Should extra-curricular activity be factored into the admissions process?**

**A** Only in limited fashion. If a candidate has been elected president of his or her senior class, it indicates leadership attributes. But the competition to get into prestigious universities is now such that kids are compelled to stuff their application resumés with evidence of all sorts of irrelevant undertakings. Doing community service is a favorite. Well and good, but community service, ought to be motivated by something beyond a college admissions form. Here is how a high school guidance counselor in New Jersey described the process: “Do sports. Check! Take advanced-placement classes. Check! Feed a sandwich to the homeless. Check!”.[32]

**Q** **What about legacies?**

**A** I see nothing wrong with giving them a narrow advantage, as long as they are competitive in other respects. The practice provides continuity and cements loyalty to the institution among families. Yet the top institutions seem almost to go out of their way to turn away legacies, to their own detriment, I believe, in terms of fidelity and fund raising.

**Q** **I notice some glazed eyes and yawning in our audience. Perhaps it's time for you to wind down.**

**A** As I indicated at the outset, this is very broad subject and we have been wrestling with it in a very partial and summary way. There are a host of matters which we have not even touched upon: the validity of tenure; the idea of “publish



or perish”; the professionalization of university sports programs, and so on and so forth. Just listing such issues of academic controversy would take several more evenings.

**Q Would you like to sum up what it is you have been trying to say?**

**A** American colleges and universities continue to be among the best in the world. That is why so many students and scholars from around the globe wish to come to them. But what I have tried to indicate, perhaps in too discursive a way, is that they also face massive problems, some of their own making. The quality of their core mission - scholarship - has declined in inverse proportion to their size. Their costs have also risen in unjustified fashion, much faster than the rate of inflation. Too often, they seem more interested in pursuing ideological ventures or building extravagant facilities than in high quality learning.

Colleges and universities have also developed octopus-like marketing and fund raising bureaucracies and all sorts of superfluous services and frills. There are issues of accountability and of fairness in whom they admit into their midst. While all these have undermined the caliber of their educational mission, none are beyond solution, at least in the long term. Debating them may be a useful start.

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Notes

1. In a treatise called *The Idea of a University*, written in 1854.
- 2 New York Times Magazine, September 30, 2007 p.25
- 3 “Many Who Plan on College Aren’t Ready, Report Finds” New York Times, August 17, 2005
4. ACT Information for Policy Makers 2007
5. The Economist, December 1-7, 2007, p.42

6. New York Times, October 6, 2007
7. In California, Community College Graduation Rates Disappoint - Washington Post, July 14, 2007
8. "Troubles Grow for a university Built on Profits" New York Times, February 11, 2007
9. J. Peter Byrne, "Academic Freedom", 99 Yale Law Journal 251, 252-253 (1989).
10. New York Times Magazine, September 30, 2007 p.109
11. The Weekly Standard, November 12, 2007 pp 20-21
12. New York Review, Oct. 11, 2007 p.33
13. San Francisco Chronicle, August 23, 2007
14. San Francisco Chronicle August 15, 2007
15. August 13, 2007 page 1
16. New York Times, January 9, 2007
17. February 24, 2007
18. New York Review, October 11, 2007, pp. 32-33
19. U.S. Census Bureau press release, August 28, 2007
20. New York Review, October 11, 2007, pp. 32-33
21. International Herald Tribune, October, 24 2007 p.6

22. Chronicle of Higher Education, from figures compiled by the American Association of University Professors
23. The Economist, December 1-7, 2007, p.44
24. New York Review, October 11, 2007, p.33
25. The Wall Street Journal, April 27, 2007 p.A13
26. New York Review, March 29, 2007, p.46
27. New York Times Magazine, September 30, 2007 p.26
28. Washington Post National Weekly Edition, September 10-16 p. 35
29. New York Times Magazine, September 30, 2007, p.28
30. New York Times Magazine, September 30, 2007, p.78
31. New York Times Magazine, September 30, 2007, p.82
32. New York Times, March 25, 2007, p.14

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