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First Friday News & Views

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Guns and Butter With a Twist

by Jonathan Wilson

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CALENDAR

▼ The next FFBC meeting is 7:00 A.M., Friday, September 7 at Hoyt Sherman Place.

Our guest speaker will be attorney Ivan Webber, speaking on Amnesty International.

▼ R.S.V.P. by Tuesday, September 4 to Jonathan.Wilson@lawiowa.com or 288-2500 by phone.

We could start almost anywhere in our recent history. We could start with the failure of levees in New Orleans when Katrina hit, or the failed state and federal responses to that crisis that continue to the present. We could turn our attention to the deadly explosion of an aged steam pipe running under the streets of Manhattan that ominously shook skyscrapers there and killed several. Or we could consider the recent collapse of the I-35 bridge in Minneapolis where the death toll has not yet been determined. Back in 1990, President George H.W. Bush was proposing \$500 million to be spent nation-wide for “Star Schools” when it was estimated that it would cost over \$5 BILLION just to bring public schools in New York City alone up to code (not to mention the 21st Century).

America’s infrastructure is crumbling around us. And all the while, we’re spending profligately on military hardware and, more recently, on old fashioned wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that are ill-suited to win against a new and different enemy. The tab for those outdated military campaigns, going badly, is already over \$450 BILLION and counting at the rate of about \$1.5 BILLION per week. That doesn’t count the lives lost, including more than 3500 American soldiers; over 1000 security contractors (read: mercenaries); and tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Iraqi civilians. I keep expecting the death rate to decline just because we’re running out of people to kill. And that doesn’t count the toll on quality of life and productivity of those grievously wounded.

What we’re dealing with folks is the perennial competition between guns and butter, one of the few things I remember about my college economics course. Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius made the direct connection after a tornado literally leveled the entire town of Greensburg, Kansas, in May of this year. She said, with refreshing candor, that the emergency response was materially hampered by the lack of equipment that had been diverted to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Pure and simple: because of our pre-occupation with those misguided adventures, we have less available to provide for our people here at home.

That perennial conflict, however, has a perverse and ominous twist never mentioned in that economics course. You see, we don’t really have the money to fund *either* our domestic needs *or* our wars. We’re borrowing it. If you don’t count the expense of these ill-considered wars, our annual federal budget deficit is running at about \$200 BILLION per year right now. That is, if you don’t count those war expenses that are being funded “off budget.” If, on the other hand, you think it prudent to count all expenditures, regardless, our real budget deficits, and our national debt correspondingly, are going up astronomically to cover the real costs of both war and domestic needs. About \$1.5 TRILLION of it is owed to our old friend China. Our number two creditor is Japan.

Because deferred maintenance of our infrastructure is less noticeable, the money tends to go to the military where, even then, we struggle to figure out whether it’s being well spent, i.e., whether it’s buying “victory.” Unattended is our infrastructure until an interstate highway drops into the Mississippi River killing people left and right and snarling traffic for probably a couple of years. Then there’s talk.

Our “willing” allies are bailing on us, just as Colin Powell predicted, and who can

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blame them. We're resorting to outsourcing to private contractors more and more in our prosecution of the wars—an expensive and corrupt option if there ever was one. We're also resorting to giving Saudi Arabia and other Iraqi neighbors cash so they can buy more military hardware from us to further inflame the situation.

It's been suggested that the American people have not been asked to sacrifice for our war efforts. It's probably true, thanks to China and other creditors. But that doesn't mean we've not been *made* to sacrifice. Just ask the families of those lost in New Orleans, New York, Greensburg, and Minneapolis because of neglect here at home.

—Jonathan Wilson

Hairspray

Hairspray, currently in theaters, is a movie version of the 2002 Tony Award winning Broadway musical which, in turn, was based on John Waters's 1988 movie. They have saved the best for last! This version loses a lot of the meanness of John Waters's original, and by dropping one of my favorite songs from the Broadway musical, *The Big Doll House*, the film becomes more focused on the racial and freedom themes of the story. Once **Hairspray** gets going there is just no stopping its full-tilt boogie until the end.

The film begins with always-optimistic Tracy Turnblat singing *Good Morning Baltimore* with infectious enthusiasm. Even though she is obviously living in one of the seedier areas of the city, she proclaims that "every day is an open door. . . and every night is a fantasy." She goes to high school, but she just lives to get out of school and rush home with her girlfriend, Penny, to watch the Corny Collins Show, an American Bandstand-like show featuring Corny's Council. The Council, a group of dancers on the show, bill themselves as "The Nicest Kids in Town." Tracy wants to get on the show and has a heavy crush on one of the Council members, Link. However, even though the show is hip, the station manager, Velma Von Tussle, despises the new rhythm and blues the kids like and in a slip of tongue reveals that she wants to steer the show "in the white direction." The only blip in Velma's all-white world is once a month when they have Negro Day. On that day the Corny Collins Show is hosted by Motormouth Maybelle (Queen Latifah).

The cast is excellent. I had originally fumed at the choice of John Travolta to play the role of Tracy's mother, Edna. This is a role that was originally played by Divine in the original, and Harvey Fier-

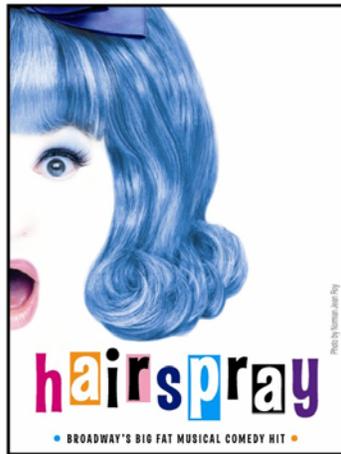
stein on Broadway. So it had always been played by a large gay man in drag. I was afraid that the very important role would descend to Eddie-Murphy-playing-a-woman-in-a-fat-suit type humor. But I was wrong. Travolta brought his incredible acting skills to hone a performance that illustrates the emotional aspects of the role. Edna Turnblat is a woman who has not been outside of her apartment since 1951 because she is ashamed of her size. One of the most brilliant transformation numbers in the movie is the song, *Welcome to the 60s*. In it Tracy tells her momma, "Ma, it's changing out there. You'll like it. People who are different, their time is coming!" The song begins with Tracy's mom being afraid to go outside, then experiencing the outside and the joy and freedom of finally being out in the street. "Take those old-fashioned fears and just throw them away!" proclaims the chorus. By the end of the song, Edna has been totally transformed. Transformed from the lady afraid to go out, to one who proclaims, "Hey Tracy, Hey Baby, Look at me! I'm the cutest chick that you ever did see. Hey Tracy, Hey Baby, Look at us. Where is there a team that's half as fabulous!"

In the song, *You're Timeless to Me*, there is another beautiful transformation. It is a number with Travolta and Christopher Walken that begins with them being estranged and Walken, the husband, in the doghouse. The song is a proclamation of their love for each other despite what they currently look like. By the end both are obviously madly in love with each other and in a magic cinema moment the dance segment transforms into a Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers-style dance in tuxedo and evening gown amongst the sheets hanging on the clothesline on the rooftop. A beautiful dance number.

In order to work, **Hairspray** always depends upon the talent of the actress who plays Tracy. Despite her size, Tracy has to be a better dancer than any of the other dancers. In the film acting debut of Nicole Blonsky, she shows she is a woman who can move her body. Plus, she has endless enthusiasm and a spirit to fight for justice that is infectious. Amanda Bynes showed considerable comedic skill in her performance as Tracy's best friend, Penny. She has to deal with her right-wing mother who thinks Penny is a Devil's child. Penny is also falling in love with a handsome black man. Jerry Stiller does a great job as Mr. Pinky, who owns Mr. Pinky's Hefty Hideaway, the fashion spot for larger women. Michelle Pfeiffer turns in a stellar performance as the right-wing, racially prejudiced, station manager who laments for the day when she won the title, "Miss Baltimore Crabs."

I've never seen such a positive musical. Most of our modern advances against prejudice came out of this 60s era of freedom. This movie presents these advances as the certain future. As proclaimed joyously in the final number, *You Can't Stop the Beat*, "Yesterday is history, and it's never coming back!" This is true about unacceptable prejudices against black, or overweight, people, as illustrated in the film. It's also true for gays, bisexuals, transgendered persons, and others who have suffered prejudice and can point to this era as the evolution of their freedom as well. This is a film that celebrates freedom in a joyous, upbeat manner. If you like musicals at all, you MUST see **Hairspray**! It is a joy!

—Gary Kaufman



IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of Economics

Our August speaker was Dr. David M. Frankel, a professor in the Department of Economics at Iowa State University. Frankel, a graduate of Harvard College and Oxford University, received his Ph.D. in economics from M.I.T. in 1993 and has taught economics at Cornell, Stanford, and Tel Aviv Universities.



Dr. David Frankel

Frankel, whose fields are economic theory and urban economics, presented a stimulating outline of his 2006 paper, “How Does Family Structure Affect Children’s Outcomes? Evidence from the [U.S.] Civil War.”

The paper’s conclusion, derived from statistical analysis of Census and military pension data of the period, is that children who grew up in female-headed families in the second half of the 19th century were not significantly less successful as adults than were their contemporaries who were nurtured in two-parent families. “We find no evidence that a father’s death in the war affected his child’s labor income as a young adult. We also find no effect on labor force participation or on the likelihood of being married [or, for males, of being an academic student] in 1880.”

The implication—at least in the context of an FFBC meeting—seemed to be that male homosexuality cannot honestly be “blamed” on the “absent father (and smothering mother) syndrome” so often cited by old-school psychologists and sociologists. A welcome conclusion in our group! Certainly, Frankel intends that modern social planners draw from his research an understanding that having a bad father can be much worse than having no father at all.

—Bruce Carr

Wit and Wisdom

A good way to get shot is to start carrying a gun.

Attorney: All your responses must be oral, OK? Now, what school did you go to?

Witness: Oral.

How do Constitutional strict constructionists get to the President being Commander-in-Chief over the Air Force? The Constitution, understandably, only mentions that status for the Army and Navy.

Why do they put Braille dots on the keypad of a drive-up ATM?

Because they make all the key pads the same, regardless of where they’ll be used.

What do chickens think we taste like?

A proctologist walks up to a bank teller, pulls out a rectal thermometer and tries to write with it. Without missing a beat he comments, “That’s just great, somebody apparently has my pen.”

If you know not where you’re going, any road will take you there.

BRIEFS & SHORTS

Be sure to RSVP for the September 7 meeting no later than September 4 to Jonathan.Wilson@davisbrownlaw.com. He can also be reached by phone at 288-2500. Our speaker will be attorney Ivan Webber, speaking on Amnesty International.

Thanks to Tony Braida for introducing our August speaker, Dr. David M. Frankel, Iowa State University professor.

Archived issues of the FFBC newsletter are now available on our website: www.ffbc-iowa.org. Check them out.

The Friends of Iowa Civil Rights Inc. is accepting applications for its annual Friends of Iowa Civil Rights Awards. The awards recognize individuals or organizations that have made a significant contribution in promoting civil rights in Iowa during the past two years in the following categories: individual, business, nonprofit/community organizations and youth/young adult. Winners will be recognized on October 15 as part of this year’s Iowa’s Mosaic statewide diversity conference. The deadline for nominations is August 30. Forms are available at www.iowamosaic.org.

A reminder to both members and non-members to designate FFBC when filling out your United Way pledge card.

Please consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the FFBC Scholarship Fund. Send your check to Jonathan Wilson, 666 Walnut Street, Suite 2500, Des Moines, IA 50309. Make the check out to FFBC and write “Scholarship” on the memo line.

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From the Editor

Stone-faced Stares from Big White Men

For three weeks in June, I entertained two guests from England. Graham and Maggie had never visited the United States, and my friend Jane and I promised them that we would show them parts of the country that most Europeans never see. In addition to seeing the sights around Des Moines and parts of Iowa, we took them to Chicago; Springfield, Illinois, and the Lincoln Museum; and Hannibal, Missouri, to visit Mark Twain's home town. They loved it all.

During their final week, we went west into South Dakota to see the Bad Lands and the Black Hills, with a side trip to Pierre to visit the State Capitol. The Badlands were as beautiful as I remembered them from a family vacation in the 1960s, but the area around Mt. Rushmore had changed quite a lot. Back in the 60s, Deadwood, South Dakota, was a sleepy town that traded mostly on its location, mining history, and the fact that Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane were buried in the local cemetery. Today, Deadwood is a garish nightmare of more than eighty gambling casinos that have marked the town as a vulgar tribute to greed and the Almighty Dollar. It was a pleasure to leave there.

Mt. Rushmore had changed quite a lot, too—not the great stone faces, even though they are whiter than ever because of a power washing just last year—but the parking area and visitor center have been greatly enlarged to accommodate the three million yearly tourists. Even though many of the local Indians would just as soon see Mt. Rushmore blown to smithereens because the site is sacred to them, Gutzon Borglum's giant carved faces of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt do inspire reverence (at least for white Americans if not others). The genius of his sculpture creates a kind of magical atmosphere for the viewer. I wonder what some other civilization, eons from now, will make of his colossal project. One thing I noticed that I didn't observe the first time I was there is that none of the heads have ears! I guess there is something to the saying about being stone deaf.

Just seventeen miles from Mt. Rushmore is the even larger but unfinished mountain sculpture of Crazy Horse. A visit to the Crazy Horse site is a must for those who travel to the Black Hills. The Lakota Sioux's head is larger than all four of the presidents on Mt. Rushmore, and it is about the only recognizable aspect of the work so far. Begun in 1948 by sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski, the Crazy Horse Memorial is being sculpted using private funds and the money collected from admissions and various shops in the complex. It relies on private funds because the local Indians did not want any government money connected with the monument. Who can blame them, given the government's miserable history with Native Americans. It will be quite some time before the entire sculpture is completed. Still, it is an amazing work in progress and well worth the \$25.00 per car load that is charged to get in.

Custer State Park is another beautiful part of the Black Hills with its breathtaking views from the top of Mt. Coolidge, herds of buffalo, and the scampering and playful prairie dogs. I'm glad I made the return visit to that lovely part of our country.

Once back in England, Graham and Maggie contacted me and wanted to know if the United States could use two more undocumented immigrants. Why not?

—Steve Person

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