

## The Tabasco Effect, *from page 30*

That summer, we were making our way to Morocco, a country of smilers. In mostly austere Granada, we had bumped into a young Moroccan with intelligent eyes, engaged in some harmless street hustle. He gave us advice in French on crossing the Med to his country. He said to avoid the big port of Algeciras. He told us it was a mess in that season because tens of thousands of Moroccan expatriates from Europe were going home in their semi-viable, overloaded old cars, piled up high with crying children and old grandmothers who were terrified to use "Christian" bathrooms. He advised us to go through Tarifa instead. It's small town, 30 minutes by bus from the Algeciras train station. From Tarifa, there is only one Tangier ferry a day in each direction, and it takes no cars. Sweet and simple.

We got off the train with our reasonable baggage in Algeciras and immediately separated from the dusty Morocco-bound tribe of travelers. We caught the small local coastal bus and got off in Tarifa, at the end of the line, since we had neither specific plans nor a place to land.

It was early afternoon. We had no reservation, as usual. We each picked up our bag and crossed the deserted street into a cafe to have a cup of coffee, possibly a snack, and regroup and inform ourselves. The young people behind the counter, a boy and a girl, greeted us merrily. The girl even inquired whether I wanted more sugar in my coffee. That was unusual in itself. European cafe personnel are more likely to defend their sugar against customer predation.

The young man had bleached hair and a good tan; he looked more edgy than most young Spaniards I had seen, yet he was wholesome. He chatted up my wife in bad but cordial English, asking where we were going. No, he said, he did not have a specific hotel recommendation, but he would go next door where they had the local paper. He described on a napkin map where everything was within the walled city and the advantage of this location over that. We made a preliminary choice. It was hot; we had our bags with us; we did not want to walk. Finding a taxi at siesta time seemed difficult. The bleached guy saw me fumbling with my cell phone. (Yes, I had purchased the European service; no, it did not do me much good. If you give a chimp a piano, you are not neces-

sarily going to get a symphony.) He told me to rest easy; he would call the first hotel of our choice to see whether it had room. Everything went well. He found us a room in a pricey but very pretty place in the old walled town.

The same evening, I was reflecting on the contrast between the mean old guys in the big city *tapa* bars and the friendly, smiling, helpful young people in Tarifa at the cafe near the bus stop. A blurry image was hovering at the edge of my consciousness. After a while, it came into focus: a small bottle of Tabasco. There had been Tabasco on all the tables in the cafe. There is no Tabasco produced in Europe, there is no Tabasco produced in Spain. It's made in New Orleans, by a single family-owned company. It's one of the few American vices that have never spread abroad.

I made inquiries from the merchants around the hotel. What kinds of tourists came to Tarifa, a small and apparently obscure town?

In the summer, mostly travelers to Morocco, smart travelers (like us). In the winter, there are high, steady winds across the straits of Gibraltar. Many foreign windsurfers come then, especially *muchos Americanos, muchos!*

Americans don't care about strange food. Many pretend to, but only at home. That's why we have so many bad Thai restaurants. Abroad, they want three things: pizza, tacos, and cheeseburgers. They are disappointed with the first, with good reason. They expect Tabasco sauce with the second and often with the third. You manage a restaurant in Europe, you want repeat American customers (best tippers in the world), you supply Tabasco sauce.

One thing leads to another. You have a lot of American customers because of the Tabasco. They are friendly, jovial, caring, and mostly kind. It rubs off on you. Pretty soon, you have morphed into a miracle: a nice, pleasantly disposed, helpful worker in the Spanish restaurant industry. Your life is sunnier; the malevolent ghost of Francisco Franco begins to dissipate. You are the light of your grandfather's heart. Life is good, thanks to America.

The Tabasco effect: one of the best ways to export the best of American culture. We could probably have a Tabasco-borne diplomacy if we wanted to. □

## Reflections, *from page 20*

had no problem with the nomination of Sotomayor. After all, it was a Republican president, George H.W. Bush, who nominated her to the U.S. District Court in New York. She was confirmed on unanimous consent of the Senate. Then, when she was nominated by Democratic president Bill Clinton to be a U.S. Court of Appeals judge, 25 Republican senators voted to confirm her. The Republicans are a little late to be opposing Ms. Sotomayor.

There persists the belief that the Republican Party is the lesser of two evils because a Republican president will at least appoint "good" (usually identified as pro-life) justices to the Supreme Court. But it was Harry Blackmun, appointed by Nixon the Republican, who wrote the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Is there any evidence that, had he won the election, McCain's judicial nominees would be better than President Obama's?

McCain voted to confirm H.W. Bush's appointment of Souter, as well as Clinton's appointments of Stephen Breyer and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. McCain said that W. Bush's appointments John Roberts and Samuel Alito would "serve as the model" for his judicial nominees. Yet both of them recently voted *for* executive power and *against* the right of habeas corpus in the case of *Boumediene v. Bush*. Sotomayor, for all her faults, has, according to the Cato Institute's Gene Healy, at least shown some "skepticism toward broad claims of executive power."

The Sotomayor nomination will not be the last occasion for a fight over Obama's Supreme Court nominees. Senior Associate Justice John Paul Stevens, who is 89, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who recently underwent surgery for pancreatic cancer, could both possibly retire during Obama's first term.

— Laurence M. Vance

funeral of Konstantin Chernenko.

But to return. Before he was done, Michael Jackson had repudiated every aspect of his identity that he could manage to repudiate — his race, his sexuality, his age, his religion, his friends, his health, even the animals on which he was once renowned for doting — yet to hundreds of millions of people around the world, that meant nothing, because there was one aspect that he did not repudiate. He was a fool, and the fools recognized their own.

— Stephen Cox

**California gold** — I have reflected before on how California and states like it appear to be serving as incubators of statist pestilence. Californians (and New Yorkers) vote in large and wasteful government programs, which lead to high taxes, lousy schools, lousy infrastructure, and no jobs. Then the Californians flee their state. But the emigrés are a disease vector; they carry to their new states the same attitudes that led to the ruination of their home state. And I have talked before about the growing crisis in state employee health and pension funds. A recent article brings both these thoughts to my mind anew.

The article is a piece of first-rate investigative journalism in the Orange County Register (May 15) called “The \$200,000 Club: State Pensioners Who Collect 10 Times Average.” It was written by Tony Saavedra and Ronald Campbell. The article reveals some of the outrageously high pensions that public employees now receive.

The facts are amazing. While the average California Public Employees’ Retirement System (CalPERS) retiree receives less than \$24,000 a year, about 4,800 of these people receive pensions of more than \$100,000 a year, and a couple of dozen receive more than \$200,000. For life! This, as CalPERS faces possible insolvency because of a drop in value of about \$73 billion from its asset base.

The individual cases that Saavedra and Campbell discuss are remarkable. The pip is one Bruce Malkenhorst, Sr., who held six different city executive positions at once for the city of Vernon, a major metropolis of 110 people. He got \$600,000 a year salary, and wound up with a lifetime annual pension of almost a half million dollars a year. (He is currently under criminal indictment for embezzling 60 grand.)

Another indigent civil servant, Anaheim City Manager Jim Ruth, retired in 2001 with a lifetime pension of nearly \$220,000, and now works as the city’s sanitation chief at a salary of \$225,000. So he clears a tidy \$445,000 a year.

But the bulk of the people receiving pensions over \$100,000 are retired public safety employees — police, firefighters, and prison guards. Their unions have proven very effective at using general public goodwill to get “3 at 50” contracts, which allow an employee to retire at age 50 with a pension equal to 3% of the final salary for each year worked. So after 34 years, the pension is 100% of the final pay.

And as the Sacramento Bee reported on March 2, fully 38% of the 11,454 Highway Patrol officers are paid over \$100,000 a year, as are 23% of the 63,287 corrections officers. Add to this the fact that public safety workers can enhance their last year’s salary in a number of ways (such as putting in overtime, or getting last minute promotions), and we can expect that the number of public safety retirees receiving over \$100,000 a year in pensions will explode in the near future.

The problem here is that the public has allowed feelings of gratitude to undeniably wonderful public safety employees to be exploited by the unions. Rewarding someone who risks his or her life on the job is right, but going beyond reasonable compensation and saying that the sky is the limit is not. Compassion, like any other noble emotion, has to be governed by rationality.

The problem for California is that the voters have been ignorant and emotional. The problem for other states is that many of these voters are moving.

— Gary Jason

**Neverland** — America lost the self-proclaimed “King of Pop” on June 25, and suddenly people rushed out to mourn him. In Los Angeles, fans circled around a star on Hollywood Boulevard with the name Michael Jackson on it, to sing Michael Jackson songs; even though that particular star belonged to a radio personality with the same name (and was no relation).

Just a couple months ago, Michael Jackson was a pariah. He was a likely child predator, with a creepy gingerbread amusement park, where no little girls were allowed. He was a narcissist who grotesquely mutilated himself to indulge his obsession with plastic surgery, leaving a hole in his face where his proud African nose originally stood. Hollywood couldn’t have written a better gothic horror script. Yet upon his death, all seems forgiven. iTunes scored record sales for Michael Jackson tracks for the first time since it went into existence. He hadn’t sold music in years, and his descent from fame had left him close to half a billion dollars in debt.

I think it’s important to remind everyone what he really was. It was the obsession with his star status that led to his problems in the first place. No loving parents would ever drop their kids off with a middle-aged man in a sequined Nazi uniform who carried a monkey around and talked like a 5-year-old girl, but because it was Michael Jackson, parents didn’t think twice about leaving their kids overnight.

Enjoy his music if you must, but don’t ever forget that the man was a monster, and the world is a better place now that he’s gone.

— Tim Slagle

**High court hypocrisy** — Republicans are not only hypocrites; they are predictable hypocrites. Although there may be good reasons for Republicans to have questioned the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to replace David Souter on the Supreme Court, that she is a liberal who was appointed by a Democratic president was not one of them.

Although Souter was part of the liberal wing of the court, he was appointed by Republican president George H.W. Bush. Not a single Republican in the Senate voted against his confirmation.

It was an earlier Republican president, Ronald Reagan, who appointed Sandra Day O’Connor to the court. Once again, not a single Republican in the Senate voted against her confirmation. She likewise turned out to be a tremendous disappointment to conservatives.

Then there is the most liberal member of the court, Clinton appointee Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Surely the Republicans in the Senate tried to block her nomination? The truth is, only three out of 44 Republican senators voted against her.

But even without all of this, the Republicans should have

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