

Century Marks

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Not So Quiet Neighborhood © Christo Komarnitski, Bulgaria

Mightier than the sword: Of all U.S. presidents, Abraham Lincoln was perhaps one of the greatest writers, matched only by Thomas Jefferson. That assessment would have surprised his contemporaries. Nevertheless, the Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural Address and the Emancipation Proclamation are three of the most remarkable pieces of political writing in American history, not just for what they say but for how they say it. All were written during tumultuous times by a largely “self-educated prairie politician.” Lincoln knew that writing could shape public opinion. Rather than bully people, he used truth and clarity to win them over. Lincoln worked hard at the craft, and his rewriting paid off: “His pen, to alter the proverb, became his sword, arguably the most powerful weapon of his presidency” (Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*, excerpted in the *American Scholar*, Autumn).

A place to read: Mystery writer P. D. James wonders if anyone has ever found a comfortable way to read in bed. Although bedtime is the only time some people have to read, James is dubious about such reading. “Reading is so important,” she says, “so necessary to the nourishment of mind and spirit that I feel that it should be as seriously ceremonial as a church service. Ideally we need a comfortable chair with back and arm support and good, well-directed light, a rest for the book if it is too heavy to hold comfortably, a small table with our favorite drink to hand, silence and solitude. It is an ideal that few of us are able to obtain” (*Time to Be in Earnest: A Fragment of Autobiography*, Knopf).

Stealing from God: Congregations operate on the basis of trust, and therefore many are caught entirely off guard when someone embezzles money from their coffers. Though many cases become public, experts in the area say that many more cases are kept secret—even from the congregation itself. That may be the worst response. Coming clean about improprieties is necessary for maintaining trust. Stealing from congregations happens most frequently in small- to medium-sized churches, which lack resources to provide the necessary oversight. Embezzlement in churches or synagogues often begins when someone with access to the money has a financial or medical crisis (dallasnews.com/religion, which includes tips on preventive measures).

The first 40 days: Unlike Christians, Jews mostly agree that it is permissible to use embryonic stem cells for research, despite the fact that human embryos are killed in the process. The laboratory harvesting of stem cells takes place within the embryo's first 14 days of existence. Jewish tradition considers a fetus *in utero* to be "like water" until the 40th day, after which it is treated "like the thigh of its mother" and thereby given human status. With no legal or moral restrictions on stem cell research, Israel has become a leading center for such research—the top nation, in fact, when judged on a per-capita basis. (The U.S. comes in sixth.) "The Jewish religion would consider it far better to use [embryonic stem cells] for cures than to simply throw them away," says Rabbi Elliot Dorff of the University of Judaism (*Forward*, August 25).

Carrot, not stick: Some FBI agents charged with debriefing al-Qaeda operatives take issue with the tough interrogation measures favored by the Bush administration. "Just building a relationship with a person, and knowing your subject matter, is what works," said one FBI agent. Another observed that disaffected al-Qaeda members need to be given an incentive to offer information and that torture is not usually an effective incentive. "People don't do anything unless they're rewarded" (*New Yorker*, September 11).

Leap of faith: In an essay titled "An Invitation to Insecurity," Marilyn Chandler McEntyre argues that the quest for security can be a dangerous pursuit. "Our dream of safety has to disappear," W. H. Auden wrote in a poem at the outset of World War II. People of faith need to be reminded that "the security God offers is not a promise about what won't happen (for instance, we won't be hit by plagues, bombs, loss of loved ones, or sudden poverty) but about what will happen: 'If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there' (Ps. 139:8, KJV)." She says that "real security is not a zero-

sum game. It can't be achieved at others' expense." She thinks American energies should be spent on trying to make the rest of the world feel secure ("helping others feel safe from our own weapons of mass destruction," for instance), rather than just on homeland security (*Weavings*, September/October).

Turnabout is fair play? During the Islamic holy days of Ramadan some evangelical Christians are praying along with Muslims—praying that they will come to know Jesus. Such prayer is not universally welcomed among Muslims. The Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University said true followers of Jesus would not pray for conversions but would demonstrate their faith through good works. But an Islamic scholar in Halifax, Nova Scotia, said that since he prays that Christians will embrace Islam, he can't object to Christians' praying for his conversion (*Chicago Sun-Times*, September 24).

Straight from the tap: Concerned about the privatization of water, leaders of the United Church of Canada say that they will try to offer tap water, not bottled water, at future meetings of the denomination. Bottled water containers, with their images of pristine natural environments, undermine citizens' confidence in public utilities and prepare the way for private companies to take over the water supply, church officials said, arguing that water should be a public commodity. A report issued by the United Church claims that tap water in most parts of Canada is as clean as or cleaner than some bottled water (ENI).