

Century Marks

Century Marks in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

Preach it: Although he attended seminary, James R. Krabill says he did not really learn how to preach until he spent time with African-initiated churches in Ivory Coast. There he met Papa Benoit, an elderly preacher who had never been to school. Benoit's method of sermon preparation each week was to pick an elementary school student who would read a passage to him, and then commit the passage to memory and ponder it for the rest of the week. On Sunday Papa Benoit would preach a powerful sermon. Under Benoit's influence, Krabill weaned himself from the need to carry notes or a manuscript into the pulpit. He also became less conscious of the clock. Benoit told him: "You Americans are always in a hurry. *You* may have the clocks, but *we* have the time!" (*Leader*, Summer).

All politics are local: Since the colonial era, town meetings have been the means of governance throughout much of New England. Usually the agenda deals only with local matters such as road maintenance. But in early March a number of organizations in Vermont were successful in getting on the agenda of many local town meetings a resolution to end the war in Iraq. Many towns were open to the discussion because on a per capita basis Vermont has had more fatalities in Iraq than any other state and is second highest in the number of National Guard troops deployed to Iraq. Some Vermonters complained about the resolution. "We've got bridges here that need to be repaired. Iraq is not our problem," said one. But another argued that a debate was needed about the impact of the war, "and the best place for that [debate] to begin is in the schools and town halls and libraries, not only in Vermont, but elsewhere" (*Los Angeles Times*, March 2).

Away without a leave: The Pentagon estimates that more than 5,500 U.S. military personnel have deserted the ranks since the start of the Iraq war. Some of them have voiced their opposition to the war, but deserters usually don't leave for political purposes alone. Some have untreated injuries or urgent family matters to attend to or financial difficulties. According to Kathy Dobie (*Harper's*, March), some of the problems can be traced to the recruiting process: recruitment officers, under pressure to meet quotas, make promises that never can be kept—that recruits can get out of the military if they change their mind, that they won't be sent overseas, that they can go to college after basic training, and so on. One person who counsels deserters says that many soldiers are appalled by what they encounter in basic training: during that experience they "can't eat, they literally vomit every time they put a spoon to their mouths, they're having nightmares and wetting their beds."

Liberalism redux: Without religion, American political liberalism would be nonexistent or very different. Think abolition, William Jennings Bryan's populism, the Social Gospel, Reinhold Niebuhr's prophetic realism and the civil rights movement, not to mention Catholic social theory, says E. J. Dionne Jr. (*New Republic*, February 28). But now the Christian Right has hijacked religion in the public sphere, and secular liberals treat religion like the plague. Whereas oldline liberals believed that social reform and self-improvement were integrally linked, liberals today emphasize personal autonomy in moral matters. Thus they alienate social moderates who are concerned about the poor and may even be relatively tolerant toward gays and lesbians, but are nervous about abortion on demand and troubled by the coarsening of the culture. "Liberals should feel no obligation to defend all aspects of commercial culture. When TV networks and Hollywood exploit sex to make money, shouldn't liberals ask why it is that the very free market so revered by the right wing promotes values that the very same right wing claims to despise?"

Color of God: *Time* magazine's recent cover story on the 25 most influential evangelicals in America slighted the increasingly multiethnic character of evangelicalism, which is due in part to immigration. According to Edith

Blumhofer, who directs the Institute for the Study of Evangelicals at Wheaton College, between 1998 and 2004 the number of ethnic congregations in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod went from 48 to 204. On any given Sunday, 28 different languages are used for worship in Christian Missionary and Alliance congregations. While the faith of these recent immigrants is at least as conservative as that of more oldline evangelicals, they vote both Democratic and Republican, and they care as much about immigration, human rights, poverty and religious freedom abroad as they do about same-sex marriage and the future of Israel (*Wall Street Journal*, February 18).

Separation of coven and state: A school district in the state of Washington called off Halloween celebrations last fall, issuing this declaration: “Use of derogatory stereotypes is prohibited, such as the traditional image of a witch, which is offensive to members of the Wiccan religion. The Wiccan (otherwise known as ‘witches’) religion is a bona fide religion under the law, and its followers are entitled to all the protections afforded more mainstream religions . . .” (*Harper’s*, March).

Auto compensation: Although Dutch Reformed Christians are known for frugality and austere church buildings, when it comes to cars they go for luxury. A survey published in a Dutch newspaper concludes that more than half of the Dutch Reformed own cars worth more than \$33,000 (U.S.), and the more conservative they are the more they tend to drive expensive cars. Some churches have even hired youth to guard their members’ cars while they are in worship services, claims a professor of ethics (ENI, February 25).