

EDITORIALS

A Bigo sentence

Four and a half years to think on it

Jan. 6, 2021, wasn't exactly a storming of the Bastille. That is, the riot in Washington, D.C., that day didn't lead to a collapsed government and "power to the people" and all that. The riot just led to criminal convictions and prison sentences.

What the rioters in D.C. hadn't figured out that day—and some haven't yet—is that the power had been in the people all along. It's the American way: Voters elect presidents, and sometimes a president of a new party is elected.

And until Inauguration Day 2021, presidents of the losing team traditionally went to the inauguration speech for the new guy to show the world that the Americans have transferred power peacefully and with grace. (Grace is not something normally associated with the last occupant of the Oval Office.)

One of the faces of the Jan. 6 riot is Richard "Bigo" Barnett, from Gravette, Ark. He was convicted of four felonies and four misdemeanors in January, but mainly he is known for getting his picture taken with his feet up on one of the desks in Nancy Pelosi's office. He also left a note: "Nancy, Bigo was here you beotch."

We're not lawyers or judicial experts, but we'll bet that most people will think the judge in this case got it about right. Team Bigo argued for a maximum of a year in prison; the prosecutors wanted seven years, plus some. The judge split the difference and Bigo (Mr. Bigo? Mr. Barnett?) received 4 1/2 years.

This seems fair. For those who'd think the sentence too harsh, we'd re-

mind them that the man brought a dangerous weapon into the United States Capitol Building—a Hike N Strike Walking Staff stun gun. The judge in the case mentioned during sentencing that Mr. Barnett had attempted to sell autographed photos, and attempted to copyright the phrase he left on the note in Pelosi's office.

For those who'd think the sentence too soft, we'd allow that Mr. Barnett didn't use the walking stick/stun gun on anybody. That's about it for our mitigating thoughts.

As this editorial was being written, a story flashed across the wire that one of the leaders of Oath Keepers was sentenced to 18 years in prison on his charge of seditious conspiracy. The man had been sentenced, according to the FLASH!, "for leading a months-long plot to prevent President Biden's inauguration by unleashing political violence, culminating in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol."

If you lead a months-long plot to prevent the peaceful transfer of power in the American government, an 18-year prison sentence seems about right. Others down the chain, who were whipped into a frenzy by self-interested politicians peddling lies about a stolen election, would deserve much less. And, we should mention, they have been getting much less. The American system continues to work. Even for those who've worked against it.

Mr. Bigo, or whatever he likes to be called, is looking at several years to think on it. Power to the people.



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COLUMNISTS

Death and taxes

OPINION

Paul Krugman



Whenever I write about debt and deficits, I receive the same letter—OK, not exactly the same letter, but a number of letters with more or less the same gist: "If I borrow money from the bank, the bank expects me to pay the money back. Why isn't the same true for the government? Why can we keep borrowing when we already owe \$31 trillion?"

Just about every economist will reply that it's misleading to make an analogy between household and government finances. But we often aren't clear enough about why, perhaps because we don't say it bluntly enough. Here's the difference: You are going to get old and eventually die. The government isn't.

I don't mean that governments are immortal. No doubt someday America will, as Rudyard Kipling put it, be "one with Nineveh and Tyre." But individuals face a more or less predictable life cycle in which their earnings will eventually dwindle.

And lenders therefore demand that individual borrowers pay off their debts while they still have the income to do so.

Governments, on the other hand, normally see their revenues rise, generation after generation, as the economies they regulate and tax grow.

Governments, then, must service their debts—pay interest and repay principal when bonds come due—but they don't necessarily have to pay them off; they can issue new bonds to pay principal on old bonds, and borrow to pay interest as long as overall debt doesn't rise too much faster than revenue.

In fact, when governments for one reason or another run up large debts, it is unusual to pay those debts off.

An example, albeit one that many people apparently don't know about, is the debt America incurred to fight World War II.

By the war's end, this debt was around 100 percent of gross domestic product, roughly comparable to the debt level today. So how did we pay off that debt?

We didn't. John F. Kennedy entered the White House with federal debt roughly the same as it was on V-J Day.

Why, then, wasn't the 1960 election dominated by questions of how to pay off the national debt? Because although the dollar value of debt hadn't gone down, economic growth and modest inflation meant that the ratio of debt to GDP had fallen by half.

This kind of thing could in some cases happen for an individual family: If people buy a house when they're young then make substantial income gains, their mortgage payments may dwindle as a percentage of their income even before the mortgage is paid off. But it's normal



for governments, which can expect to see their tax receipts grow year after year with no end in sight.

Revisiting the story of America's failure to repay World War II debt, I found myself wondering whether governments borrowing large sums that they never repay could be thought of as a newfangled, dubious innovation—hey, this is the 1950s we're talking about, but there are people out there who are still predicting doom from Franklin D. Roosevelt's decision to take us off the gold standard in 1933.

Governments have often borrowed to fight wars, sometimes on an impressive scale.

By the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the British government's debt, according to Bank of England estimates, was 184 percent of GDP—far above America's debt at the end of World War II. Most of that debt consisted of consols—perpetual bonds that pay interest forever but never require repayment of principal. Still, even those can be retired. So how did Britain pay off its Napoleonic debt? It didn't.

British public debt in 1851, when Prince Albert opened the Crystal Palace exposition celebrating industrial and technological progress, was basically unchanged from its level when the Duke of Wellington won the Battle of Waterloo 36 years earlier. The idea that we should expect governments to pay off their debt isn't just ill-informed, it's also centuries out of date.

In much more recent history, when governments were mistakenly pursuing fiscal austerity in the face of high unemployment, I used to accuse deficit scolds of being obsessed with Victorian virtues. I was, I now realize, being unfair to the Victorians.

So, for all those whose instinct is to assume that a responsible government would, like a responsible individual, pay off its debts as soon as it can, again: Governments aren't like people. If death and taxes are the only sure things in life, well, death isn't an issue for governments, and taxes are an asset—a growing asset—rather than a liability.

Paul Krugman, who won the 2008 Nobel Prize in economics, writes for the New York Times.

Of unknowing mules

Few will question, as it relates to drugs, that fentanyl is the biggest challenge of our time. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, fentanyl is 50 times more potent than heroin, and in 2021, 90 percent of opioid-related deaths involved the bloody drug.

In the past two years, overdoses have driven down life expectancy in the U.S. for the first time in decades.

Because the vast majority of fentanyl is produced in Mexico, and a record number of migrants from Mexico are seeking to live in the United States (some legally, some not), a few lawmakers have tried to link the two by contending that hordes of illegal immigrants are bringing truckloads of fentanyl with them to the States.

It's an easy story to wrap our arms around because it seems so sensible. But, here's the thing: It's not exactly true.

The fact is, 86 percent of the fentanyl that has been stopped at the border has been at a "port of entry" while being transported by American citizens. It comes across hidden in commercial trucks. And some U.S. citizens unwittingly bring it back across in packages with GPS devices that are clandestinely attached to their cars. The GPS beacon is tracked, found, and then the drug is re-

covered.

In fiscal year 2022, 14,104 pounds were seized at ports of entry, while 2,200 were seized by border patrol agents between ports of entry.

It's far easier for a border patrol agent to spot a line of immigrants trying to cross the desert between ports of entry than it is to determine which of the 247,000 cars and nearly 12,000 trucks that cross the border on a daily basis may have fentanyl hidden within their cargo.

Despite this, some have tried to capitalize on the story, and have characterized the record seizure amounts as a failure of the Biden administration. It could easily be characterized as a great victory that 16,000 pounds of the stuff was kept out.

Further, the fentanyl trade was in its infancy during the Trump administration; it's now fully grown (we hope we've passed the high point), so it's not fair to compare one administration against the other.

Whether it's about fentanyl, or any other subject, it's been said countless times that if there's a will, there's a way. We could shut down legal and illegal immigration completely and it would not stop the flow of fentanyl to the market that unfortunately demands it.

OTHERS SAY

Everywhere, bikes and scooters

Citi Bike turns 10 years old this week and we will celebrate the birthday. What's far more tenuous is the overall status of two-wheelers in the five boroughs. While it's perfectly fine that they have flooded the streets, riders and the city have done too little to keep those streets—and sidewalks, where pedestrians should rule—safe and orderly.

Daily cycling in the city has nearly doubled over the past 10 years, but the bigger explosion has been the relatively recent unleashing of 65,000 delivery workers on e-bikes and electric scooters, driven by the demand of delivery-hungry customers. When stored, they're a fire hazard. When parked, they create clutter. When moving, they zip to and fro, far too often running red lights and hogging sidewalks.

Those who ride small vehicles, whether regular bicycles or the motorized variety, deserve to be safe from cars and trucks, which can kill them in the blink of an eye. It's no small tragedy that cyclist fatalities have shot up since an early Vision Zero-credited decline. Part of the answer is more protected bike lanes, where those make sense in a place with many narrow streets.

Part of the answer is better enforcement and stronger rules. While pedal-assist bicycles have their place alongside normal bikes, keep throttle-based motorized vehicles out of parks. Keep all two-wheelers off sidewalks, except when there are kids behind the handlebars. And keep communicating to riders, through public education and ticketing blitzes, that red lights and other rules are not for squares and suckers.

Remember us, too

COLBERT I. KING
THE WASHINGTON POST

I don't know where I will find myself on Monday when "Taps" is played at the National Memorial Day program at Arlington National Cemetery. But I won't be partying at a backyard barbecue bash or dashing from store to store in a shopping center catching door-buster sales.

I also can't say whether I will devote an hour or minutes to remembering the fallen. But I know with certainty that some time will be spent giving thanks for the men and women who shed their blood and sacrificed their lives in service to the United States. They were brothers and sisters in a military uniform that I proudly shared as a commissioned officer in the Army.

At his dedication of the battlefield cemetery at Gettysburg in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln spoke of the sacrifice of the fallen troops as having given "the last full measure of devotion" to the nation.

Generations have given their all. A few of them were college classmates and fellow ROTC graduates who returned home from Vietnam in flag-draped coffins. They won't be joining any trips to the mall. Or family get-togethers. They, and the more than 65,000 U.S. service members who were killed in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, will never know what it's like to get a day off the job, to gas up the car and hit the road.

Many of them will be simply forgotten. But we can't let it go with that.

What am I asking? Take a pass on holiday sales? Close the grill? Spend Monday wearing sackcloth and ashes as an ostentatious sign of mourning? Perish those thoughts. But to reduce Memorial Day to just a grand occasion to kick

off the summer is disrespectful.

Besides, Memorial Day has a special resonance for this D.C. native. We still don't have what we have rightly earned as citizens: full and equal representation in Congress or full authority to govern ourselves.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), however, has detailed the costs borne by the District in a resolution introduced in advance of Memorial Day recognizing D.C.'s service members and veterans.

Most Americans do not know the facts in Norton's resolution:

—635 D.C. residents were casualties of World War I, a figure greater than that observed by three states during that war.

—The casualty figure of 3,575 D.C. residents lost in World War II was greater than that sustained by four states.

—The 547 D.C. residents who were Korean War casualties were greater than that observed by eight different states.

—243 District residents were casualties of the Vietnam War, a casualty figure greater than that observed by 10 states.

We D.C. residents have more than paid our dues, but we have done so, as Norton says, "without the equal protections of American democracy."

So yes, I'm going to carve out a stretch of time on Monday to honor the men and women who have paid the ultimate price. Memorial Day has been successfully, and probably irrevocably, appropriated by many for pleasure and profit. All I'm asking is that you take a moment of the day to commemorate the service and sacrifice.

Those of us in the autumn of our years will appreciate that simple act. So too will the families and friends of the fallen.

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