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## Conspiracy World

Behind every nonpartisan institution, the right sees the malevolent hand of a liberal cabal

When Republicans began questioning President Obama's birth certificate four years ago, it seemed at first like a petulant reaction to a lost election, a flush of nativist and racist anger that would diminish over time. But the preposterous charges never went away. As this election cycle shows, many in the Republican Party continue to see the president as the center of a broad and malevolent liberal conspiracy to upend the truth.

To live and seethe in that world of conspiracy theories means rejecting any form of objective reality. When unemployment numbers make the administration look good, they are obviously "cooked." When poll numbers put Mr. Obama ahead, they are skewed. Birth certificates are forgeries. Safety-net programs are giveaways to supporters. Health insurance reform is socialism. And campaign donation disclosure is antibusiness.

It's an upside-down version of life, and it is not innocuous. When desperation leads political critics of the president to discredit important nonpolitical institutions — including the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Federal Reserve and the Congressional Budget Office — the damage can be long-lasting. If voters come to mistrust the most basic functions of government, the resulting cynicism can destroy the basic compact of citizenship.

Last week, the Labor Department reported that the unemployment rate had fallen to 7.8 percent, depriving Mitt Romney of his standard talking point that the rate had never been below 8 percent during Mr. Obama's term. No one expected Republicans to celebrate a positive trend for the country, but almost immediately the anchors on Fox News and the editors of right-wing Web sites saw something more sinister: a conspiracy, led by the Obama campaign, to manipulate the numbers to make the president look good a month before the election.

The charge was absurd. The Bureau of Labor Statis-

tics, which along with the Census Bureau conducts the underlying household survey, is run by career civil servants and is impervious to political pressure and manipulation, as all but the hypnotized in Washington understand. But, this time, the conspiracy theorists went beyond the usual suspects. Jack Welch, the former chief executive of General Electric, said Mr. Obama's Chicago staff obviously changed the numbers, though he had no evidence of chicanery beyond the outrageous charge that the numbers came from an "ideologue division of the federal government."

To Mr. Welch and his fellow cynics, the facts were inconvenient, so they had to be wrong. And not just wrong, but deliberately so. That's the same mentality that led ideologues last month to accuse independent pollsters of deliberately skewing polls to show Mr. Obama ahead, though no such charges are emerging now that Mr. Romney is improving in the polls. And this trend is reinforced when people who know better, like Newt Gingrich and Senator John McCain, trash the civil servants at the State Department and the Congressional Budget Office. (Mr. Romney, to his credit, did not question the latest jobless figures.)

Democrats aren't happy about the latest polls, but they aren't suggesting Mr. Romney is manipulating them, just as they didn't undermine the Bureau of Labor Statistics when the jobless numbers were high. Many are far more worried about a conspiracy that is verifiable and serious: the concerted effort by Republicans over the last four years to deprive minorities, poor people and other likely Democratic supporters of their voting rights.

That, of course, doesn't seem to bother those who see "Chicago's" evil hand everywhere. When there is real-world evidence of political collusion, the conspiracy theorists are nowhere to be found.

## The Sandusky Rape Verdict

Justice is delivered to the former Penn State coach convicted of 45 counts of child sexual abuse

The case of Jerry Sandusky for the serial raping of young boys while a coach in Penn State's football program ended Tuesday as it began: in denial and delusion. "In my heart, I know I did not do these alleged disgusting acts," Mr. Sandusky said in a call from the jailhouse to the Pennsylvania State radio station Monday night. "My wife has been my only sex partner, and that was after marriage."

Mr. Sandusky repeated the gist of that bloodcurdling statement on Tuesday before Judge John Cleland of the Centre County Court in Pennsylvania, who sentenced him to 30 to 60 years in prison on 45 convictions of raping, abusing and assaulting 10 boys over many years. University officials, including the former head coach Joe Paterno, looked the other way or covered up the crimes to protect a football program that earns tens of millions of dollars a year.

"Before you blame me, as others have, look at everything and everybody," Mr. Sandusky said. He claimed eight young men were motivated by "attention, financial gain, prestige" when they took the witness stand to describe acts of rape and abuse about which they had been so traumatized and ashamed that it took them many years to tell their stories. This, of course, is the man who was asked on television by Bob Costas if he was sexually attracted to young boys and had trouble denying it.

One of Mr. Sandusky's victims was a young boy who was sodomized by Mr. Sandusky in the Penn State football shower room, according to testimony by Mike McQueary, a former assistant coach. Mr. McQueary did nothing to stop the attack. He reported it the next day to Mr. Paterno, who kept it from the police. Another was Mr. Sandusky's adopted son, who did not testify in the trial but said later

that he was sexually assaulted by his adoptive father.

Mr. Sandusky began his jailhouse statement by calling this "the worst loss of my life," as if it were just another football game.

This is not the end of this case. Two other Penn State officials are facing criminal charges for not reporting the attacks, and Penn State has been fined and sanctioned by the N.C.A.A. and other collegiate football groups. The university board, to its credit, fired Mr. Paterno, who died early this year, and the college president at the time, Graham Spanier. The board commissioned Louis Freeh, the former F.B.I. director, to examine the university's behavior, and he produced a damning account of negligence, indifference and incompetence.

It's not clear how Penn State intends to carry out Mr. Freeh's recommendations. In a recent meeting at The Times, Karen Peetz, the chairwoman of the Penn State board of trustees, and Rodney Erickson, the current president, said they are "taking all recommendations under advisement" but indicated there were some — they would not say which — they might reject.

Ms. Peetz and Mr. Erickson did not deny the seriousness of the crimes or the catastrophic failures of management and leadership that were revealed. But they denied the obvious truth that football has been too dominant in Penn State's culture, with terrible consequences. They said Penn State had not yet created the crime-reporting protocol that is required by federal law.

Asked about lessons Penn State has learned, Mr. Erickson said that "bad things can happen in good places" and child abuse happens everywhere. That is true, but has little relevance for Penn State.

## Out-of-Control Compounding of Drugs

The meningitis outbreak that has sickened at least 119 people and killed 11 of them has laid bare a disturbing lack of regulatory oversight of pharmacies that mix drug compounds and ship them around the country. Unless Congress passes legislation to strengthen the hand of the Food and Drug Administration, the public will continue to be at risk from contaminated products.

The outbreak has been linked to a steroid made by the New England Compounding Center in Framingham, Mass., that was shipped to 23 states. The steroid was almost certainly contaminated by a fungus, although final laboratory results are not yet in. Some 13,000 patients may have had the tainted steroid injected near their spines to ease back or neck pain. The center has shut down, surrendered its license and recalled all of its products, not just the steroids, while state and federal investigations try to pin down exactly what went wrong.

How could this happen? As Denise Grady, Andrew Pollack and Sabrina Tavernise explained in The Times, these pharmacies fall into a legal no man's land between the Food and Drug Administration and 50 state pharmacy boards, most of which have little expertise and limited resources to ensure the safety of these products.

Years ago, compounding pharmacies were small-scale operations that mixed ingredients to meet the special needs of patients who couldn't take the standard drugs, perhaps because they were allergic to a particular ingredient or couldn't swallow a pill and needed a liquid form instead. Such pharmacies still exist, often inside a hospital, where they custom-make mixtures in accord

with prescriptions written by the patients' doctors.

Over the past decade or more, however, some pharmacies have morphed into miniature drug companies that compete with big pharmaceutical firms and produce compounds that essentially mirror drugs already on the market. Doctors and hospitals have turned to these pharmacies because their prices are often much lower than those charged by major manufacturers or because the standard drugs are in short supply.

Therein lies an element of risk. Compounded drugs have not gone through the same rigorous tests for safety and effectiveness required of standard drugs and are not made in plants inspected by the F.D.A. to ensure good manufacturing practices. There have been several incidents in recent years in which compounded drugs have caused injury. Some critics complain that the F.D.A. and state regulators should have intervened in this case sooner and more forcefully, which may well be true. But conflicting court decisions have left unclear what powers the F.D.A. has to regulate these pharmacies.

Congress can and should clarify matters with legislation. The legislation ought to grant the F.D.A. any powers it thinks it needs to inspect compounding pharmacies, monitor their nationwide sales and judge the safety or effectiveness of their products. It should also empower the F.D.A. to block pharmacies from making drugs (such as injectable steroids) that require a higher degree of sterility than many of them can meet. The goal is to ensure that there are no further calamities in this lightly regulated market.

## The Justices Weigh Race and Admissions

### TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Race and College Admissions, Facing a New Test by Justices" (front page, Oct. 9), about the Supreme Court affirmative action case, to be heard on Wednesday, involving the University of Texas at Austin:

You quote a student as saying race-conscious admissions were needed to address "disparities in opportunity between high schools, which disproportionately affect minorities."

Why, though, should minorities get an advantage and non-minorities the opposite? Those applicants on the wrong end of the disparities in opportunity should be considered more favorably, but that is completely independent of race. There may be a correlation, but there are plenty of whites facing hardship, economic or otherwise, and plenty of minorities who aren't.

Institutions should give the benefit of extra consideration to those who have made the best of limited opportunities. To give that benefit to someone solely on the basis of race is the very definition of racism. Isn't that exactly what we're trying to avoid? PETE ROKOSZ  
Madison, Wis., Oct. 9, 2012

*The writer is a student at the University of Wisconsin.*

### TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Moving Beyond Affirmative Action" (Op-Ed, Oct. 5): Thomas J. Espenshade points out that only 1 percent of all Hispanic and black 18-year-olds benefit from affirmative action. Having been at a university that practiced affirmative action, I can say that that 1 percent makes a huge difference in terms of campus culture and the lives of their own families and future families.

Those 1 percent become leaders in their communities, and they will lead many more to higher education. Mr. Espenshade says more minority students report their experiences to be negative than do white students. As a minority student, I, too, had a more nuanced college experience, but that doesn't mean that I have not benefited im-

mensely from graduating from an elite private university.

Ultimately, how can he judge who should attend these universities?

NIDA ABDULLA  
Berkeley Heights, N.J., Oct. 6, 2012  
*The writer, a graduate of Brown University, is a high school English teacher.*

### TO THE EDITOR:

Thomas J. Espenshade argues that abolition of affirmative action by the United States Supreme Court might prompt elite colleges and universities to shift their endowments to support outreach efforts to K-12 schools, aimed at narrowing the racial and ethnic achievement gap.

Aside from being extremely unlikely, his argument ignores another, more ominous outcome: An overly broad Supreme Court decision rejecting affirmative action in college admissions would likely curtail K-12 desegregation efforts and thus deepen the savage inequalities in our nation's schools. SAUL GEISER  
Albany, Calif., Oct. 5, 2012

*The writer is a research associate at the Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley.*

### TO THE EDITOR:

Thomas J. Espenshade tells us that in 2003 Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote that she expected affirmative action preferences to disappear within 25 years. At a conference on affirmative action at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, where I was program director, I sensed an uneasiness with the topic on the part of Constance Baker Motley, an African-American judge, and at a conference break I asked her why. "I despise the necessity to do this 'reverse discriminating,'" she said, "but I swear to you that we will end it in 25 years."

The year of her comment was 1976 — 36 years ago. OTIS L. GRAHAM JR.  
Santa Barbara, Calif., Oct. 5, 2012

*The writer is professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara.*

## Invitation to a Dialogue: A Student's Call to Arms

### TO THE EDITOR:

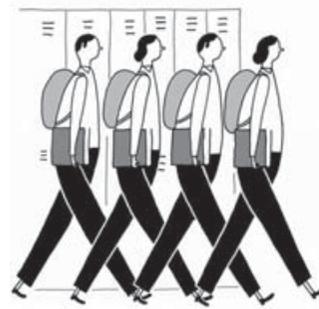
When President George W. Bush signed No Child Left Behind into law, few would have predicted that the next decade of education policy would unfold into a disaster of epic proportions. The law was based on a flawed concept of a "good education" — high scores on standardized tests.

As a result, the curriculum was narrowed, shaving instruction time in the arts, music, science and history. Schools were transformed into test-preparation factories with a stress on drill, kill, bubble-fill methods. And ruthless accountability measures were enacted, with bribes and threats at their core. It's safe to say that the law has failed miserably.

Yet when President Obama came into office, he enacted Race to the Top, a \$4.35 billion competition that dished out money to states that adopted the president's policies. In effect, it was No Child Left Behind on steroids. The pressure to garner high test scores has gone haywire, the number of cheating scandals has mushroomed and the teaching profession has been dehumanized. Enough is enough.

In this election cycle, both Mitt Romney and President Obama have largely ducked the issue. Instead of proposing a bold, game-changing plan to transform schools for the 21st century, they remain stubbornly fixed on the status quo. We cannot afford to lose yet another decade of precious time and resources. Reforms are not enough; only a revolution will suffice.

As a student, I want to be taught how to think and create and explore. I'm not



DANIEL FROST

a number in a spreadsheet; I'm a creative and motivated human being. I want my teachers to be paid well, given autonomy and treated like professionals. I want my school to be adequately funded. Is that too much to ask?

If either candidate called for the repeal of No Child Left Behind and the abolition of Race to the Top, and pushed schools to allow students to become the captains of their learning, he would find millions of teachers, parents and young people at his side. NIKHIL GOYAL  
Syosset, N.Y., Oct. 8, 2012

*The writer is a high school senior and the author of the book "One Size Does Not Fit All: A Student's Assessment of School."*

**Editors' Note:** We invite readers to respond by Thursday for the Sunday Dialogue. We plan to publish responses and Mr. Goyal's rejoinder in the Sunday Review. E-mail: letters@nytimes.com

## The Wrong Approach to Saving the Postal Service

### TO THE EDITOR:

"Distress Deepening, Postal Service Defaults on \$5.6 Billion Benefits Payment" (news article, Oct. 2) lacks context: No other agency or company is required to prefund future retiree health benefits, and this obligation accounts for 80 percent of all postal red ink.

Meanwhile, regarding the Sept. 28 editorial "The Wait for Postal Default," the Senate's flawed postal bill downgrades service to the public and would destroy, not save, the Postal Service. It

### ONLINE: MORE LETTERS

*The American Bar Association writes about victims of human trafficking, the United Steelworkers about vaccinations for health workers.*  
[nytimes.com/opinion](http://nytimes.com/opinion)

would, for example, lead to ending Saturday delivery — a penny-wise, pound-foolish idea that trims 2 percent of the budget by yielding 17 percent of service.

This also jeopardizes the future by making it harder for the Postal Service to tap into the exploding e-commerce market, which is already profitable for the Postal Service but where much more could be done. The best day to deliver those packages: Saturday, when people are home.

The common thread is clear. Congress should address its unfair 2006 pre-funding mandate, rather than dismantle the universal network that provides Americans with the world's most affordable delivery service.

FREDRIC ROLANDO  
Washington, Oct. 2, 2012

*The writer is president of the National Association of Letter Carriers.*