

First World not the epitome of logic, reason we think it is

In Zimbabwe, where I recently visited, there is a certain witch doctor/medicine man (maybe internist, too) who dammed a stream to grow mermaids. He also restricted the flow of water to nearby farms. The government dispatched an official who reported that the local people didn't think much of the mermaid scheme, but they did of the medicine man. If he were overruled, they thought they would starve to death. At last report, the stream was still dammed.

Chuckle, chuckle, we say. This is the way things sometimes are in the Third World where logic and rationality can be scarce commodities and where the crackpot idea of a medicine man can result in the ruination of several farms. But as someone returning from abroad, I find myself thinking the same thoughts about the United States. Logic seems to have taken a powder here.

Take, for instance, the current mild panic over the trade deficit. When I left the country nearly three weeks ago, this was only a potential issue. When I returned, it had achieved such importance that it not only had made the cover of the news magazines, but the president himself was paying attention. As with South Africa, he was trying to figure out a way to stop Congress from taking some meaningful action.

You may ask why, after years of massive trade deficits, everyone is suddenly so concerned about the problem.

You would think that the administration would by now have a plan to deal with it and in a sense it does. It will continue doing what it has been doing and hope the deficit goes away. This is the U.S. version of growing mermaids.



Richard Cohen

In fact, you do not have to stretch the analogy very far to conclude that President Reagan is our national medicine man. With the exception of some scattered supply-siders who, like theoretical communists, are waiting for their theory to be applied in its purest form, there is almost no one who does not think that the trade deficit is tied to the federal budget deficit. The latter, a \$200 billion annual mistake, contributes to the overvalued dollar which in turn makes American goods non-competitive abroad.

And yet, the administration and a lobotomized Congress does nothing about the budget deficit. Congress tried in the last session, trimming the budget by about \$50 billion, only to learn after recess that it made almost no difference. The government is starved for funds. It cannot keep the defense industry rolling in dough and at the

same time keep taxes where Reagan put them with his 1981 tax cut. The obvious answer is to raise taxes, but a popular president won't permit it. Like the Zimbabwean medicine man, there is no way around him.

In this and other matters, people sort of stand around and wait for the medicine-man-in-chief to change his mind. Former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker has now joined much of the civilized world in saying that maybe a tax increase is in order. But nobody much, certainly not the president, paid attention. Instead, the president is pushing for a tax-reform bill that would be revenue neutral — in other words, besides the point — and that oxymoron known as the congressional leadership is wondering whether it can be done. Meanwhile, the deficit ticks like Edgar Allen Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart."

The bane of the Third World is irrationality. But the First World is hardly the epitome of logic and reason that we think it is. In the same way that the Zimbabwe medicine man is waiting for his mermaids to grow, the administration is waiting for the budget and trade deficit to go away.

Keep your eye on Zimbabwe. When they succeed in growing mermaids, we may close the deficit.

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Cohen writes an editorial column for the Washington Post.

Heinous murder wasn't 'especially heinous'

ROYKO from Page 4

he detected a pulse. So he put her head under water in the tub and went home.

Now, it is possible she was already dead, but her body was still twitching. If so, I'm wrong. He didn't drown her.

So, there are my glaring errors. He didn't stalk her. He just watched and waited. He didn't actually rape her. He used her unconscious body in another

sexual way. And maybe he didn't drown her. Maybe all he did was strangle her.

In any case, the murder wasn't "especially heinous, atrocious, cruel, or manifested exceptional depravity by ordinary standards of morality and intelligence." At least, that's what the judge and three of his associates say.

I'm glad the judge straightened me out. And I'm so impressed by his eye for detail — the significant difference between stalking and waiting and watching, and the clear difference

between "heinous" and "especially heinous" — that I now wish I lived in Nebraska.

Yes, I'd love to be a resident of Nebraska. Especially when the voters there get a chance to decide, as they soon will, whether Justice Krivosha should remain in his job.

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