



National Assessment Specialists, Inc.  
IRWIN SAVODNIK, M.D. & MEDICAL ASSOCIATES, INC.



# News Gram

JULY 2011

VOLUME 19, NO. 1

\$49.95/year



## The People, Not the Politicians, Are the Problem

by Pierre David

THE SO-CALLED DEBATE IN WASHINGTON SURROUNDING THE debt ceiling can make just about anyone a little depressed. Democratic Senator Harry Reid called Congressman Eric Cantor “childish” for apparently tangling with President Obama. President Obama’s spokesman dismissed Cantor’s contention that the president stomped out of a meeting in a huff. Cantor says the president needs to lead. And so on.

There’s a tendency — not entirely unhealthy — among voters and journalists to blame all this on the politicians. What we want Democrats and Republicans to do is to sit down and say: We’ve got a big problem that’s going to be a much bigger problem very soon if we don’t hammer out a compromise, so let’s get to it. Then, a few hours later, we want them to emerge from some conference room at the White House or on Capitol Hill and say: We’ve got a deal — crisis averted.

But that’s not happening. Or, well, it is, but not the way we want it to. We want the two parties to be grown-up about things, to act with respect and civility toward each other, to say: We have differences, but those differences are minor in

the bigger scheme of things. We want them to be better.

It would be easy to say this is all the politicians’ doing. In a sense, it is. They’re the faces and voices we encounter on television and online and in newspapers and magazines. They’re the people who are out there, front and center.

But politicians are generally timid and cautious and hypersensitive to what other people think. When they speak, they usually do so knowing that a lot of other people agree with them. Otherwise, they wouldn’t say what they’re saying — and they wouldn’t get elected. In other words, the political class is not so much a strange, warring class that has been cordoned off from America. It is a reflection of it. What we find so dispiriting about the politicians and their theatrics is that all these things tell us something important and unsettling about ourselves. One suspects that the president and congressional leaders have all acted poorly, to one degree or another. But their actions are little more than indications of the mindset and temperament of hundreds of millions of Americans. When the politicians act, they act knowing that

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# Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets

by Sudhir Venkatesh

ONE MIGHT THINK THAT *GANG LEADER FOR A DAY: A ROGUE Sociologist Takes to the Streets* wouldn't make for good beach reading. Alas, one would be wrong. Sudhir Venkatesh's very compelling, highly intelligent account of his ten-year investigation into gang life and the drug trade on Chicago's South Side is not only rich with insight; it's also eminently readable.

Venkatesh began his exploration of life in the projects as a graduate student at the University of Chicago. The year was 1989, and the crack epidemic had transformed inner cities across the country into war zones. Over the next decade, Venkatesh would learn all about the people who live in the projects, and about the underground economy and sociology of massive apartment houses where gangs of young men dole out an array of goods and services (not just drugs), administer justice and, in a way, maintain stability. He would discover that the official and academic views of life inside the inner city miss or obscure the intricacies of daily life there. And he would even forge a friendship with a gang leader — a crack dealer, a criminal. He would do this by being a first-rate thinker and explorer — listening, asking questions, never pretending to know when he didn't.

Maybe the most extraordinary revelation that comes out of *Gang Leader for a Day* is just how ordinary the projects are. In the eyes of most Americans, and certainly most white Americans, the inner city is a parallel universe filled with thugs, homeless people, drug dealers, teenage mothers, social workers and the occasional cop making an arrest. Venkatesh makes clear that this isn't too far from the truth. But there's a deeper reality, too, a world that rarely, if ever, is glimpsed by people who are not living in the projects. That is the truly mundane, day to day operations and perturbations of life in a typical community. In this place, all the ordinary ebbs and flows of coexistence are commonplace: Children going to school, mothers making dinner, friends chatting on the phone or in the hallway of an apartment building. There are arguments, reconciliations, joys, disappointments. There are people who are good and decent and bad and lecherous and somewhere in between.

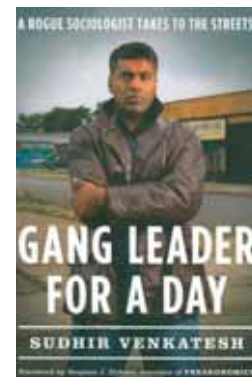
Central to this ordinary life in this rather extraordinary place is the underground economy. We learn here of the many ways in which the people in the projects live and work and get by, day in, day out. Not surprisingly, the same forces that motivate consumers outside the inner city obtain here: People want to avoid paying taxes; people want more for less; supply is generated by demand; business (legal or illegal) is always looking to bring down overhead; self-interest, but not greed, dictates the vast majority of decisions that people, good and bad alike, make everyday.

What separates the inner city from the world beyond is the lack of an external, state-imposed law. The normal structures of non-inner-city life do not exist here, starting with the police. The police exist, but they do not maintain the law. The law, the rhythms and parameters of everyday life, is upheld by the gangs.

We might snicker at this suggestion. The idea that a law-breaking organization is itself the basis of "law" sounds absurd. But it's not. In the absence of another controlling authority, the gangs serve as the arbiter of justice. Gang leaders are mafia dons, no doubt. But they are also judges and police officers and defense lawyers and prosecutors. They provide for the whole set of activities that the state does not, or cannot, provide.

All of this necessarily leads to different conclusions. What you believed in, what your politics were, before you started reading will, no doubt, lead you to draw certain lessons.

But one thing seems indisputable: The inner city, as Venkatesh shows, is not nearly as hopeless and mindless — and lawless — as it might appear to outsiders. Absolutely, there is plenty of crime and deprivation and tragedy. But there is also a vibrant, everyday life that exists despite, or because of, external circumstances. The question that policymakers ought to be asking themselves is: Why can't we replace the "lawless law" of the ghetto with the "real law" that obtains everywhere else? Why can't we achieve some semblance of normalcy? —PD



## ECONOMIC SLOWDOWN DOESN'T AFFECT STATE EMPLOYEE SALARIES

With the recent recession and economic downturn many Californians were surprised to learn that the state pays a significant number of public employees salaries above \$200,000.

Salary information was made public for the first time this month and has initiated some controversy.

Of the 1,400 state employees making in excess of \$200,000, nearly half of them work in the prison system as doctors, dentists, and nurses, and a few hundred more serve as psychiatrists and other medical professionals in the Department of Mental Health. Other employees in the medical field like the president of the state's stem cell research agency were included in the list.

Also included in the list is the president of the workers' compensation insurance fund who makes nearly \$600,000.

The release of employee salaries came about following a salary scandal in Bell. As a result Chiang, a Democrat who has been in the spotlight for taking millions of dollars in campaign contributions from state employee unions, released payroll information from counties and cities. His effort didn't go without some criticism, however. Chiang's staff left out names of the public employees, which has angered many open-government advocates who advocate for even fuller transparency.

— Sabrina L. Schaeffer

## The People, Not the Politicians, Are the Problem

—continued from page 1

millions, if not tens of millions, of people would act the same exact way. They are mirrors of us, and we do not like what we are seeing.

Granted, it shouldn't be too much to ask for a congressman or senator (or a president) who rises above mass opinion and simply leads with conviction. And it isn't. Washington is filled with elected officials who believe the things they say. In fact, many, if not most (if not all), of the people who have been taking part in the debt-ceiling negotiations probably are acting with conviction — as they believe they should act, according to some external principle that transcends any one vote.

The problem is that we, as a country, as a people, are losing our ability to converse — to debate, think, to disagree. That our politicians have a hard time forging agreement, or working through their many points of contention, is no surprise. Americans as a people are less able than ever to do the same.

Why is this? Well, for one thing, we live in an increasingly atomized society that doesn't encourage meaningful interaction. Yes, we communicate more than ever — via any number of devices or technologies — but we don't really think or hear. Indeed, the velocity and abundance of our communications preempt meaningful listening. The new technology demands that we not listen, that we speak quickly, sardonically, acridly — and then move on to the next distraction or sound blip. He who listens and reflects is regarded, sadly, as out of touch, quaint, irrelevant.

This is not the fault of the instruments. We are not formed by our gadgets. We retain the power, at all times, to be the people we want to be.

So what should we do? We could start by identifying a few facts: The vast majority of Americans want what is best for America. We disagree, and sharply, about “what is best,” and we disagree about how to get there. But we are bound together by a shared value system that billions of non-Americans admire and seek for themselves.

This will take real leaders — thinkers, corporate chieftains, celebrities, even writers. It will require a recalibration of our expectations and our tone. It will mean being adults, again, and it will mean an end to the nastiness and stupidity of a truly childlike politics. That is what the nation requires and deserves. Only then, after this has happened, will the politicians act accordingly. The politicians will not lead. They will be led. —PD

### SECURITY BREACH AT STATE OFFICE

According to the *Orange County Register*, 9,000 current and former California public workers have had their personal information stolen from a state office.

The data was extensive, including names and addresses, Social Security numbers, dates of birth, ethnicity, as well as workers' compensation information. Officials learned that an employee working in the office transferred the information to an external hard drive last April. They have since been placed on administrative leave until the completion of the investigation. At this point, state officials claim there is no evidence that the personal data has been shared.

— Sabrina L. Schaeffer

### HORSE OWNERS FACE NEW WORKERS' COMPENSATION FEES

While we often think about workers' compensation in the context of certain traditional industries like construction, manufacturing, and food production, it is perhaps needed nowhere as much as in the horse racing business. That's why many horse owners were disappointed with the increase in workers' compensation fees that took effect this month.

The California Thoroughbred Business League, a group of businesses and associations that subsidize insurance fees such as trainers' workers' compensation, jockey mount workers' compensation and starter fees, has been forced to make a variety of changes. The CTBL recently approved funding for a statewide workers' compensation program to Finish Line Self Insurance Group.

A steady decline in available resources prompted the significant changes that are apt to leave some owners disappointed. For instance, according to the CTBL, the cost of jockey mount insurance premiums rose to \$140. Horse owners previously paying \$60 will now be required to pay 50% more, and a subsidy provided by the league will make up the remaining balance.

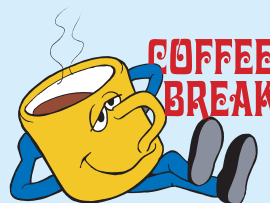
Accompanying these rate increases is a change to the guaranteed starter fee, originally implemented by Gov. Schwarzenegger in 2004 to make it easier for owners to cover insurance fees. The starter fee for owners whose horses finish toward the back of the pack — sixth or worse — stood originally at \$400, but will now be reduced to \$350.

Despite some increases in fees, Finish Line expects “there will be considerable savings for the vast majority of trainers.”

— Sabrina L. Schaeffer

Emil Kraepelin:

- A. Was a German psychiatrist in the late 19th century who regarded psychiatric conditions as brain diseases.
- B. Was a poet and psychiatric investigator who regarded psychiatric problems as afflictions of the “sick soul”.
- C. Was a nephew of Jung who stole his research data and became famous.
- D. Is a very cynical contemporary German comedian.



ANSWER: A  
Kraepelin was a famous German psychiatrist who regarded psychiatric diseases as the same kinds of disorders as thyroid or pulmonary conditions. He is still revered in the present day.

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## WELCOME DR. ADDES!!



### ***DR. ADDES SEES CLAIMANTS IN OUR TORRANCE OFFICE.***

A native of the Soviet Union, Irina Addes, M.D., immigrated to the United States thirty years ago. She joins NAS after years of practicing psychiatry in both New York and Los Angeles. Dr. Addes received her M.D. from the Pritzker School of Medicine at the University of Chicago and completed her residency at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. She served as Chief resident at North Central Bronx Hospital, where she oversaw the acute inpatient unit.

Dr. Addes is a Qualified Medical Examiner who has been in private practice in Torrance since 2008. She brings a holistic approach to her assessment of each patient, considering developmental, interpersonal, social, genetic, and medical history. She previously worked in a variety of capacities, including many years with the QTC where she provided psychiatric evaluations for veterans, many of who suffered from PTSD. She also has experience treating developmentally disabled and emotionally disturbed youngsters at St. Agatha Home at New York Foundling Hospital and working with children, adolescents, and adults in community clinics, outpatient drug treatment programs, and group homes. Dr. Addes is fluent in Russian. ■