

STORM OVER THE ELECTION

by Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.
for the Sunday Gazette

The duty of the man who investigates the writings of scientists, if learning the truth be his goal, is to make himself an enemy of all that he reads, and, applying his mind to the core and margins of its content, attack it from every side. Suspend your faith in the writings of the ancients and submit it to experiment.

Ibn al-Hayham, a.k.a. Alhazen (965-c.1040 A.D.), as quoted by Julian Bell,
London Review of Books, 25 October 2012, p. 13.

Or, as my mother used to say with something closer to bumper-sticker brevity, "Believe nothing of which you read and only half of what you see."

Two factors prompt this introspection, the inanity and inaccuracies of the political TV ads with which we are bombarded, some from both sides, and the constant reminders of the anti-scientific and illogical mindsets of so many national Republican candidates. The first will be gone in a few more days; the second is likely to remain a danger to the Republic for a long time.

By the Sunday on which you read this, you will know how well government, especially the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has handled the storm. But it has, in the words of the talking heads, "frozen" the presidential campaign. Both candidates have cancelled campaign events for at least a couple of days.

We have two reasonably recent data points that relate to past FEMA performance, Katrina of 2005 during the second term of George W. Bush, a storm that was the costliest natural disaster and one of the five deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States. It was handled so poorly that it prompted the resignation of FEMA director Michael D. Brown,

Last year's Hurricane Irene in the third year of the Obama administration was a large and destructive tropical cyclone currently ranked as the fifth costliest hurricane in United States history. Unlike Katrina, it affected our local areas. And though there are undoubtedly local people who feel that FEMA's recompense was inadequate, its overall performance was certainly far better than that of 2005.

But imagine if just New York State had had to pay the high cost of Irene, if indeed they could have or would have at all. As constituted, FEMA is essentially a national insurance policy whose premiums are paid by the taxpayers of all 50 states in order to help the smaller number of states affected by any particular storm. FEMA is an economic necessity, an agency whose importance in protecting us is exceeded only by the departments of Defense and Homeland Security.

FEMA has an important role in advance of a disaster, too, not just in the aftermath. I have not been a fan of Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey, but I was very pleased to hear him say on Monday the 29th, just after returning from campaigning for Mitt Romney: "I appreciate the President's outreach today in making sure that we know he's watching this and is concerned about the health and welfare and safety of the people of the State of New Jersey." Then, the next day, Christie told news outlets that the president's response had been "outstanding," and "If you think right now I give a damn about presidential politics, then you don't know me."

But what is Mitt Romney's attitude toward FEMA? During a primary debate on CNN, he was asked, in the context of the Joplin, Missouri tornado of May 22, 2011 and FEMA's cash crunch, whether the agency should be abolished so that states can individually take over responsibility for disaster response.

"Absolutely," he said. "Every time you have an occasion to take something from the federal government and send it back to the states, that's the right direction. And if you can go even further, and send it back to the private sector, that's even better."

Now, as to the anti-science. Most federal Republican officeholders and candidates either do not believe in evolution, or are afraid to admit that they do. Some even go so far as to say that Earth is only 8,000 or so years old (rather than the known four billion years). And though they can credibly claim that it cannot yet be proved that global warming is caused by human activity, most deny that the earth is warming at all. Perhaps after this week some will change their minds. It's not the case that there will never be another ice age, there will. But while you wait, Earth will warm to some higher average temperature and then take several thousand years to cool and freeze over. And so it goes, as a famous Schenectadian said so often.

And there are two egregious examples where judgment awaits November 6. The Missouri candidate for the U.S. Senate, Todd Aiken, believes that there is a difference between "legitimate rape" and some other kind that he doesn't name, and that a woman's body knows how to repel the sperm of the rapist as an act of natural contraception.

The somewhat similar case is that of Indiana Republican Senate candidate Richard Mourdock who has said that "God intended" pregnancies that result from rape. Imagine the accused rapist who tells the judge that he didn't do it because God, not the usual Devil, temporarily suspended his free will and made him do it. A political party should be held accountable for nominating such Neanderthals. And Romney and Ryan continue to support both.

Though not natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, and biology, the logic-based language of science is mathematics and the simplest form of mathematics is arithmetic. The worst indictment of Romney-Ryan is that they just cannot add, subtract, and multiply (though they are pretty good at division). The Ryan Budget doesn't compute, the Ryan plan for voucherization of Social Security doesn't compute, and neither does Romney's tax plan. The federal budget just can't be balanced by reducing taxes by 20% and finding enough deductions to withdraw from high-income taxpayers to keep their share of federal income tax payments the same.

The final and most dishonest aspect of Republican advertising is that "on Day-1," Obamacare will be repealed and replaced. This is another instance where they cannot count. The Affordable Care Act is the law of the land with the constitutional imprimatur of the Supreme Court, courtesy of a Roberts' rule of order. Repeal or amendment by the Senate would take 60 votes, not just 50 plus a vice-presidential tie breaker, and the highest expectation of the GOP is to reach about 52. Current polls indicate that they won't even reach 50.

I cannot understand why the Presidential race is so close. As of this writing, polls indicate that Romney will win the popular vote by a smidgeon but that Obama will earn at least the 271 Electoral votes needed to win.

Then what would Scalia do?

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Postscript of 1/22/2013 - This column was rejected. Something has happened with regard to the Gazette's criterion for Sunday opinion pieces (but not to Letters to the Editor on any day). After years of printing anything I wrote on any subject, I am now supposed to write only about local issues and leave national politics to the syndicated commentators.