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LETTERS

Cambridge 02138
Endowment taxes, final clubs, Chapter and Verse

A TOO-POLITICAL MADISON?
In his review of a book about James Madison (“America’s Little Giant,” January-February, page 56), Lincoln Caplan makes the statement that the Electoral College is “obsolete.” I suggest that it is not. The United “States” is just that—a group of states bound together by agreement. The U.S. therefore is not a country, it’s a federation. The Electoral College is just one means of granting power to each state to assert its rights vis-à-vis the federal government. It’s up to each state to create its own mechanism for participating. If the States wish to change how they participate, it’s up to them, including an (unlikely) vote to amend the Constitution.

Richard Borgeson, J.D. ’69
Katonah, N.Y.

I have long admired Caplan’s writing, but even the best among us can let political leanings cloud historical judgment. Caplan used his book review to bemoan “big money,” voter ID laws, and Internet bots. Really? His book review to bemoan “big money,” voter ID laws, and Internet bots. Really?

A reviewer with libertarian, rather than progressive, instincts could just as easily argue that the rest of us make. Many of us have had to postpone or eliminate purchases and expenditures we would like to have made because we had to pay taxes instead.

Finally, it does not seem that Harvard and other universities had many advocates arguing their side of the issue. Why were they?

ENDOWMENT TAXES
I’d like to make a few comments about “Taxing Matters” (January-February, page 17).

Harvard is subject to a tax rate of 1.4 percent. This rate is considerably below the rate that the rest of us pay. In fact, most of us would kill for a tax rate of 1.4 percent.

Drew Faust worried about “weakening the nation’s strongest contributors to medical cures, economic innovation, job creation...” Leaving aside the grandiosity of this comment, it just means that Harvard will have to make the same choices that all the rest of us make. Many of us have had to postpone or eliminate purchases and expenditures we would like to have made because we had to pay taxes instead.

Charles G. Kees ’00
San Antonio

demarcating a given sphere in which the federal government may act has fallen almost entirely by the wayside: “Since there is virtually nothing the government has not tried to do, there is little it cannot be asked to do.”

Better yet, we could resist the temptation on all sides to remake the founders in our own image. Historical inquiry tends to reveal that our current situation is not as unique, our predicament not as severe, and our indignation not as righteous as we imagine in the moment. It is no doubt comforting to claim the mantle of Madison’s constitutionalism, but self-justification is rarely the path to wisdom.

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Finally, it does not seem that Harvard and other universities had many advocates arguing their side of the issue. Why were they?
they so isolated? It could be that they have adopted and promulgated political correctness, which does disdain and disparage the beliefs that many of us have. If Harvard and other universities deliberately alienate a large part of the public, they should not be surprised when the public acts in ways other than what Harvard perceives as its own best interests.

As a last thought, it is amusing to be lectured about “conservative principles” by a liberal magazine representing a liberal institution. If two can play at this game, can I note that “liberal principles” are in favor of larger government and higher taxes—and so Harvard and Harvard Magazine should have been promoting these higher taxes long since?

Tom Neagle, M.B.A. ’72
Fort Mill, S.C.

To fully understand the impact of the tax reform on Harvard, one must examine all sides of the issue.

While the very slight increase in the tax on endowment income may have a modestly deleterious impact on the University community, that impact is offset by the dramatic capital gains in the stock market, since the election of Donald J. Trump. Using the S&P 500 as a proxy for the endowment, I estimate (without having the actual numbers at my fingertips) that the Harvard endowment has grown by $6 billion since the election of DJT.

Such capital gains dwarf, rather dramatically, the very slight tax imposed on the investment income, which amounts to an estimated $20 million per year. In other words, Harvard has already gained enough in capital gains to cover 300 years of that tax increase...and even more if future cash flows are discounted according to proper mathematical discounting rates. Future increases in donations can also be expected from a raging bull market with a low tax structure. The tax-reform package is not the enemy of academia and innovation. Neither is capital itself. Quite the contrary, actually, Trumpian tax reform is a boon to academia and to innovators both within and without the university walls.

For Harvard to truly excel at innovation, it should begin by embracing the greatest innovation in the history of mankind, namely capitalism itself.

Jonathan L. Gal ’89
Provo, Utah

Editor’s note: The magazine does not have a political orientation; among the commentators cited were some conservatives who decried the imposition of federal taxation on formerly tax-exempt nonprofit institutions—an extension of the public sector into a formerly private realm. Given the diverse composition of the endowment, an index of publicly traded U.S. stocks, like the S&P 500, is an insufficient benchmark for investment performance. And it is possible, of course, that lower tax rates may discour- age philanthropy.

FINAL CLUBS, CONTINUED

While at Harvard, I did not belong to a fraternity or a final club. So my ox is not being gored. What the President and Fellows sent out December 5 (News Briefs, January-February, page 20) is a megadose of condescending self-righteous simpering superiority. Big Brother knows best, and until the benighted come to recognize his truth, he will withhold “decanal endorsements and leadership positions supported by institutional resources.” So get with the program, you fraternities, sororities, and final clubs at Harvard. The telescreen is watching.

Bill Swann ’64
Knoxville, Tenn.

I would like to make the following modest proposal regarding the Harvard administration’s effort to punish single-sex clubs.

These clubs aren’t on the campus and they own their own real estate. They sit close to the College. I’m reminded here of another such institution: St. Paul’s Roman Catholic Church in Harvard Square, which sits in proximity to some of these same clubs and whose sexism is of a piece with these organizations’. When did you last hear of a Catholic female priest, cardinal, or bishop? The power in this Church resides with the male sex.

So I think any stu-
(continued from page 4) the dent who is seen entering St. Paul’s should be subjected to the same punishment being dished out to a single-sex club member: no Rhodes nor Marshall scholarship nor a team captaincy. To enforce this, the University should employ non-Catholic students to photograph anyone of student age seen entering the church at times of a mass. Using facial-recognition software, the administration could easily identify Harvard students. The tactic could also be applied to students attending Orthodox Jewish services in Cambridge. When did you last meet a female Orthodox rabbi?

I am of course being facetious. But I’m deliberately invoking a spectre of a new McCarthyism, one that is likely to happen if the University’s sanctions against these clubs go into place. It is certain that the lists of club members will be kept secret. Will the College employ students to infiltrate these organizations and note who the members are and start “naming names” (as we said in the 1950s) to deans?

The sanctions may be well intended. But there are certain problems that the College cannot solve.

A. David Wunsch, Ph.D. ’69
Belmont, Mass.

ROBOBEEES

In “The RoboBee Collective” (November-December 2017, page 56), you describe the sort of ambitious, cross-disciplinary and multi-pronged project that is a hallmark of Harvard engineering. The article chronicles in detail the contributions of Professors Robert Wood, Gu-Yeon Wei, and David Brooks, and refers briefly to a critical co-leader of the RoboBee project, Professor Radhika Nagpal. Your readers may enjoy learning more about her important role in this work.

While Wood, Wei, and Brooks helped the RoboBee take flight and control its aerial maneuvers, Nagpal’s expertise in collective artificial intelligence provided the theoretical basis for a swarm of RoboBees to communicate and function as a colony. Her research on self-organizing multi-agent systems takes bio-inspiration from social insects such as termites and ants. In her Kilobot project, with its 1,024 golf ball-sized microbots, she pioneered an understanding of how to program large-scale autonomous swarms. Not only was Nagpal’s work a cornerstone of the RoboBee vision, it was chosen as one of the top 10 breakthroughs by the journals Science and Nature.

She has furthered the exploration of embodied intelligence of autonomous robot collectives in her Termes project. How is it, she asks, that individual termites cooperate to build stunningly complex mounds, or legions of army ants coordinate efforts to transport materials and build dynamic structures? And how can we use insight into such collective behavior to get large swarms of robots—whether they crawl, fly, or swim under water—to carry out useful tasks, from plant pollination to construction to search and rescue operations? Her Self-Organizing Systems Research Group is breaking new ground on these foundational questions.

Along the way, Nagpal has forged a role as tenacious champion of the next generation of engineers and scientists and serves as a role model for young women interested in STEM.

Frank Doyle
Dean, John A. Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences
Sail Vadhían
Area Chair, Computer Science, SEAS

CHAPTER AND VERSE LIVES ON

I was sorry to see that Chapter & Verse (January-February, page 58) has been largely replaced by the Internet and will become “an occasional item only.” I spent a long time trying to track down a story via the Internet, but it was a C&V reader who recognized the plot and told me the name of “The Shanrahan Strad,” as well as the book where it was published. I enjoyed getting reacquainted with stories I remember from high school, and I’ve used “The Shanrahan Strad” frequently since in remedial reading classes. I was also pleased to be able twice to help other seekers of lost words.

I always look for C&V in my Harvard Magazine, and I still will look for the occasional posting. Another small bright pleasure crushed by the power of the computer.

Jane Arnold, A.L.B. ’85, M.T.S. ’92
Queensbury, N.Y.

I was disappointed to learn that you intend to discontinue Chapter and Verse except as “an occasional item only.” In my view, it has been one of the features that distinguish Harvard Magazine from other alumni magazines that I receive. It certainly has not been superseded by the World Wide Web, as the farewell notice maintains.

There are often connections in memory that cannot yet be fully duplicated by artificial intelligence. About 15 or 20 years ago, at a time when Google searches were already available, I was able to supply the answer to a “Chapter and Verse” question because I remembered reading a short story many years earlier in an O. Henry Prize anthology; this information allowed me then to find the full citation on the Internet through the O. Henry Prize listings. Clearly it had not been found there by the questioner or by Harvard Magazine, since the editor subsequently wrote to me to ask what type of search strategy I had used to locate the citation.

I hope that you will reconsider the magazine’s decision, and that you will keep “Chapter and Verse” as one of your regular features.

Edward Tabor ’69
Bethesda, Md.

Editor’s note: We are not killing off the department; it will appear occasionally, depending on when we receive queries, or answers. The volume of queries has declined, likely because of the power of contemporary online searches (the favorable interpretation), or because there are fewer readers (the unfavorable one). Happily, we have received a new query, and C&V appears on page 58.

SHIP’S FATE

The ship mentioned in “American Studies” (The College Pump, January-February, page 68) did in fact sink. The S.S. Harvard and its sister ship, the S.S. Yale, sailed between San Francisco and Los Angeles. On May 30, 1931, while steaming south, the Harvard made what was termed an improper course correction and ran aground on some rocks about four miles north of Point Arguello. All the passengers were taken off in the lifeboats, but the ship could not be freed from the rocks. It broke up and sank two weeks later.

Paul McCormick, LL.B. ’65
Bloomfield, Conn.

The life preserver from S.S. Harvard recalls the century-old scandal involving the New York, New Haven & Hartford Rail-

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road, its attempt to monopolize all forms of transportation in southern New England, and its running battle with Boston’s “people’s attorney,” Louis D. Brandeis, LL.B. 1877. Harvard and her sister ship, Yale, were built in 1907 for the Metropolitan Steamship Company, which intended to use them in competition with the New Haven’s own steamship lines on Long Island Sound (including the legendary Fall River Line). In a set of devious transactions motivated by the New Haven, in 1910 Harvard and Yale were transferred to a Pacific Coast steamship operator for service between San Francisco and Los Angeles, to get them out of New England.

John Reading, Ed.M. ’72
Brookline, Mass.

MORE ON MERCER

When I was an architecture student at Penn in the mid ’60s, Mercer’s astonishing buildings were a pilgrimage objective to those of us less prone to orthodoxies. The photos accompanying the article brought back a vivid memory of being admitted to Fonthill by a fussy, tiny old lady who was said to have been his housekeeper. We had the astonishing house and glorious museum to ourselves—the norm then, I suspect.

The article does not mention Edmund March (Ned) Wheelwright’s use of Mercer’s Moravian tiles in the Harvard Lampoon building, where his name appears immediately below those of Ned and his brother Jack in a memorial window. Although Mercer, unlike the Wheelwrights, was not a Lampoon member, they did overlap at Harvard and were all involved in College theatrics. Later both Ned and Mercer were inscribed as “Masters” of the Boston Society of Arts & Crafts. And J.T. Coolidge (as noted, the author of a Mercer obituary) was an “India Wharf Rat,” along with the Wheelwrights.

Dennis J. De Witt, M.Arch. ’74
Brookline, Mass.

We were delighted to read the Vita on ceramicist Henry Chapman Mercer, and noted with interest the mention of his floor tiles at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Unmentioned and gone—but not forgotten—were the Mercer tiles at Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum. They were originally laid on the ambulatory floor that ran (and still runs) around the courtyard at the second-floor level. But the tiles were unable to survive the demolition and reconstruction necessary to bring the museum into the twenty-first century, in terms of climate control,

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Marjorie Benedict Cohn, A.M. ’61
Weyerhaeuser curator of prints emerita
Arlington, Mass.

Emily Rauh Pulitzer, A.M. ’63
Former chair, Art Museums Visiting Committee
St. Louis

Nancy Freudenthal responds: I appreciate the comments of all three writers who seem to share my joy in Mercer’s work—whether the warmth of his tiles or the imagination of his architecture. I wrote the Vita to pass along my enthusiasm and am so pleased to receive enthusiasm, and information, in return. It is satisfying to imagine I might have encountered his tiles at the Fogg long before I became aware of Mercer, and intriguing to learn of tiles not in the published (not necessarily complete) records of the Tileworks. Those records do include the Lampoon Castle, but as images don’t seem to be had, I was delighted to see the window honoring Mercer’s role in the building. He reported that in 1909 he was made an honorary Lampoon editor. Now I understand why.

THE LORD’S WORK

The story on Father Columba Stewart (“From Here to Timbuktu,” January-February, page 62) rings close to home to me. I was a member of the Harvard staff in 1975 when we admitted this somewhat unusual kid from a public high school in Texas. Fast forward some 30 plus years, and Father Stewart and I found ourselves in rural, central Minnesota “working” for the monks and nuns of St. Benedict.

The article documented well his incredible journey and contributions. I remained in higher education as associate director of admissions at Harvard and Radcliffe until 1981, when I left to finish my doctoral studies at the Graduate School of Education.

Father Columba and I sit on the President’s Cabinet at St. John’s University with another Harvard guy, President Michael Hemesath; needless to say, with his academic credentials and his personal courage, when Columba speaks, we all listen intently. I am so pleased that the magazine chose to do this story. He is the best possible example of wisdom, passion, faith, and commitment. He is, indeed, doing the Lord’s work.

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Cal Ryan-Mosley, Ed.D. ’81
Minnetonka, Minn.

UP A TREE

I was delighted about the article publicizing the Arnold Arboretum’s efforts to collect living material from remote Sichuan, China (“Botanizing in the ‘Mother of Gardens,’” January-February, page 32). Dedicated botanists like Michael Dosmann and Andrew Gapinski are safekeepers of our planet’s vanishing natural wealth. I’ve studied trees for more 30 years in forests across tropical East Asia and I understand their motivations and joys. And their frustrations!

Their struggles to collect specimens from trees were all too familiar. Despite loads of tantalizing seeds overhead, often they didn’t even attempt the fruitless effort. The one ma-
LETTERS

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ERRATA AND AMPLIFICATIONS

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And a photo caption in Harvard Squared (“A Wintry Jaunt to Newport, Rhode Island,” January-February, page 12A) mistakenly relocated the billiards room from The Breakers to Rosecliff.

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Chuck Cannon ’88
Lisle, Ill.

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