

*Sunday April 22, 2012*

## **Consorting with the enemy**

By Jim Taylor

Granted, those U.S. Secret Service agents should not have taken prostitutes to their hotel rooms in Cartagena, Colombia.

But why do so many Americans consider sexual misconduct outrageous – Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano called the agents' actions "inexcusable" – while turning a blind eye to potentially more serious screw-ups?

During his recent visit to Kelowna, biblical scholar and professor emeritus Marcus Borg spoke caustically of his country's obsession with "loin issues."

Republicans in particular, he noted, focus on below-the-belt concerns – abortion, contraception, promiscuity, prostitution – to the exclusion of everything else. The rest of body and mind -- parenting, health care, education, justice, scientific research, corporate ethics, social responsibility, international relations – all take second place to the crotch.

So it's okay to bomb Cambodia and Laos, to suffer dementia while governing the nation, or to waste 6400 lives in two fruitless wars, provided you keep your zipper up.

You can blow a well in the Gulf of Mexico and poison a thousand miles of coastline, tip the world economy into a tailspin by manipulating credit derivatives, torture and imprison suspected terrorists without trial, and foment hatred against women, gays, blacks, Muslims, and immigrants, without raising more than an eyebrow.

But dallying with an apparently willing intern can get you impeached. And just ask Gary Hart, John Edwards, Herman Cain, or Ted Kennedy how their sexual peccadilloes torpedoed any presidential aspirations.

## **Legal, but hardly ethical**

As I write this, eleven of the twelve Secret Service agents have been punished. Nine of them lost their jobs; one more lost his security clearance. One was exonerated.

Yet technically, they did nothing illegal.

Article 134 of the US military's criminal law states that patronizing prostitution anywhere is a crime when committed by service members. For the 12 military personnel also involved, therefore, it was clearly a crime.

But apparently no similar prohibition applies to federal agents.

Besides, prostitution is legal in Colombia. (It's also legal in Canada, although soliciting is not.)

While I personally disapprove of prostitution as exploitation of women, these women were hardly unwilling victims, like hotel staff waylaid while doing their jobs.

## **Causes for concern**

To be sure, hiring hookers implies that these agents consider women little more than bodies designed for male pleasure. It also suggests that vows of loyalty mean little to them.

In an NBC interview, President Barack Obama described these particular agents as "knuckleheads." But he also defended them for putting their lives on the line for him every day.

If I were Obama, I'd start worrying. If his bodyguards can't keep their peckers in their pants for their wives and partners, what makes him believe they'll put the rest of their bodies in front of a bullet for him?

The story emerged after one of the prostitutes complained that her client had stiffed her with a \$28 payment instead of the agreed-on fee of \$800.

I'd worry about the ethics of bodyguards who consider three cents on the dollar a fair repayment of a contractual commitment.

Also, according to a story in the *Washington Post*, "There was no sexual activity because the men were so drunk that they fell asleep immediately after bringing the women to their rooms."

If they were that drunk, I'd worry about their ability to protect the president the next morning.

## Spinoffs from cocaine trade

Colombia is the most militarized nation in Latin America. It spends 3.7 per cent of its GDP on its military forces – more than twice as much as Brazil. (Some sources claim Colombia spends 6.1 per cent on its military; perhaps that includes U.S. grants.) Over the last decade, the U.S. has funneled \$5 billion into Colombia, 80 per cent going to the military and police, ostensibly to fight Colombia's drug cartels.

Colombia is, of course, primary producer of the cocaine snuffled, smoked, swallowed, and injected by Americans.

Economic theory identifies two key factors – supply and demand. To cut off supply, the U.S. has replicated its defoliant programs from Vietnam, spraying peasant coca farms.

But without the demand from U.S. consumers, the coca supply would have no value.

Coca leaves themselves are not hazardous. In Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador, I have drunk coca tea to help me acclimatize to high altitudes. I did not get addicted. Nor did the peasants who chewed coca leaves for thousands of years to help them cope with cold, hunger, and hard work.

But the military campaign against the drug trade has led directly to the proliferation of sex clubs and brothels in Cartagena's prostitution zone. Women displaced by the armed conflict fled to Cartagena. Many were trafficked into prostitution by the drug cartels, who used their criminal networks to control the lucrative trade.

I would worry about federal agents too clueless to realize that they were collaborating with the forces they're trying to defeat.

I don't condone the actions of the Secret Service agents in Colombia. But paying for prostitutes' services may be the least of the activities that Americans should be concerned about.

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## YOUR TURN

I'm somewhat relieved that no one accused me of being a spoilsport, with my column about the excessive speed possible with many modern cars and motorcycles.

Mary Elford found the YouTube video that I had mentioned: "I was horrified. If a car, not able to see it coming, had changed lanes or moved slightly, there would have been creamed motorcycle. Or bisected car, as you said.

"I'm not sure about raising speed limits. But I do wonder why ordinary cars have speedometers that go to 180 or 240 km/hr? Only police and ambulances really need that capability."

John Willems wrote, "I disagree with your statement that there are only two reasons for having that kind of power, to race or to show off. Sadly there is a third reason, and that is to have. Some race, some show off, some have. Why do we have 5000 square foot houses, million dollar retirement funds, and more bombs?"

“Maybe we need to go back to loving each other, respecting each other and loving God. Then we would not need speed limits. Less is more.”

Ted Wilson also disagreed with my dismissal of the need for power: “Not trucks? My pickup doesn't have 500 hp but it does have lots, enough so that it runs much of the time on 4 rather than 8 cylinders when I'm driving sensibly and not towing my RV. Could I get along on less hp? You would get very frustrated if I had much less and you were behind me when I'm towing the trailer.”

Yes, that was an oversight. Truckers need power to haul heavy loads. But it's torque that does that work, not horsepower per se.

“I'm a little surprised,” Ted continued, “that neither you or any of those who responded to your PTSD column mentioned the WW1 service men. Compared to the conflicts mentioned that was HELL on a far greater scale both in terms of intensity and duration. Those who did survive were changed for ever, as was our society.”

Ted Spencer noted, “My boring old Volvo station wagon's speedometer goes up to 260 km/h. I've no idea how much of that my boring old Volvo could use up but, I'll bet, most of it. Why?

“Every car on the road these days has, at its heart, an engine control computer. That computer already has a speed limit programmed into it, based on the speed rating of the specified tires, but that speed limit might be 220 km/h.

“It would cost exactly nothing for every car - and motorcycle - sold in Canada to have a software-imposed speed limit of 100 km/h, or 110 km/h. Yet I can't remember pontificating on this subject to anyone and receiving a positive response. Why?”

Jane (she preferred to use only her first name) also thought about controls: “My ex-husband used to drive an 18-wheeler across Canada and the US. The truck he drove had a governor installed in the engine that limited the speed of the vehicle to 90 km/hr. The very same technology could be adapted to fit a car or, in this case, a motorcycle.

“I can't understand why anyone would want or need to go 299 km/hr on any road. I live in Ontario where the standard major highway speed is 100 km/hr and people routinely drive 120. Some even dare going a little faster, but all speeders would be but a blur on the landscape compared to the Victoria, BC rider.

“While I understand the thrill of speed, why not create test facilities where they can do so safely, with medical crews on site to provide aid (they will not wait in vain!), and install governors on all motor vehicles to help keep the roads safe. We might even end up with reduced insurance premiums! If someone was to complain that the restriction violated their rights, I would ask about the rights of those put at risk on our roads!”

Jim Henderschedt wrote: “My wife, an ex head-trauma rehab nurse, agrees with you 100%.”

Art Starr said he had heard about “increasing speeds on Ontario freeways to 130 km/hr. Seems like a big step and may create some challenges during commute-hour periods. Wonder how that works in terms of fuel consumption.

Eduard Hiebert assumed (correctly) that the 120 mph sprint I referred to took place in my early twenties. That led him to wonder “When and where the knowns began influencing the natural curiosity behind what we anachronistically from an older age project our sense of *learned* caution onto an earlier age which we, not they, see and describe as pushing limits. From the younger age's perspective, it's an open door despite repeated failures to learning to stand, to walk, to run...

“I would point out, however, this natural quest to take things to the next level is quite separate and different from an ‘addiction...’”

Eduard is quite right. I used the word “addiction” without thinking fully through its implications. As he commented, “At the mature stage the alcoholic knows not to touch the drink, while early on, he might encourage someone to have false confidence of their own limits and capacities when metaphorically still learning how to stand, walk, run...”

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca).

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## TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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## PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, [www.seemslikegod.org](http://www.seemslikegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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