

June 8, 2014

Of course, Americans look at the Bergdahl trade from our point of view. Nathan Hodges in the WSJ puts us in the shoes of Afghan villagers.

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Fifteen years later, local residents here are responding with fear and dismay to the U.S. release of the notorious commander, along with four other Taliban leaders in exchange for Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, the only American prisoner of war who was held by the Taliban. The group released a video on Wednesday showing the hurried handover a few days earlier of the American captive, looking gaunt and dazed.

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When the Taliban seized control of this area from their Northern Alliance rivals in 1999, they systematically demolished entire villages, blowing up houses, burning fields and seeding the land with mines, according to two comprehensive studies of war crimes and atrocities during wars in Afghanistan and human rights reports. Mr. Fazl played a major role in the destruction.

"There was not a single undamaged house or garden," said Masjidi Fatehzada, a shopkeeper in Mir Bacha Kot, the district center. "My entire shop was burned to the ground. There was nothing left."

Khwaja Mohammad, a farmer in the village of Sheykhhan, remembered how Mr. Fazl's men took away his son, a civilian, and sent him to Kabul's Pul-e Charkhi prison.

"They jailed him for nearly three years," Mr. Mohammad said. "They took him when he was on his way from the bazaar to buy oil and flour." ...

Texas congressman Steve Stockman with the best tweet of last week.

*The Bergdahl swap crystallizes all that is Obama: **A man who won't let obeying the law stop him from making a bad decision.***

Charles Krauthammer says; "Free him, then try him."

... What to do? Free him, then try him. Make the swap and then, if the evidence is as strong as it now seems, court-martial him for desertion.

The swap itself remains, nonetheless, a very close call. I would fully respect a president who rejected the deal as simply too unbalanced. What is impossible to respect is a president who makes this heart-wrenching deal and then does a victory lap in the Rose Garden and has his senior officials declare it a cause for celebration. The ever dutiful, ever clueless Susan Rice hailed it as "an extraordinary day for America."

Good God. This is no victory. This is a defeat, a concession to a miserable reality, a dirty deal, perhaps necessary as a matter of principle but to be carried out with regret, resignation, even revulsion.

The Rose Garden stunt wasn't a messaging failure. It's a category error. The president seems oblivious to the gravity, indeed the very nature, of what he has just done. Which is why a stunned and troubled people are asking themselves what kind of man they have twice chosen to lead them.

Jennifer Rubin posts on the terrible "Taliban terrorist trade."

The Taliban terrorist trade is beginning to crowd out other scandals. As with the Veterans Affairs fiasco, the outrage is not partisan. Democrats are irate that Congress was not alerted about the prisoner swap while Republicans are beside themselves over the idea of negotiating with and releasing terrorists. Both sides have huge doubts that the trade was in our favor and deep concerns that the deal doesn't restrict the terrorists' ability to return to the battlefield. For President Obama, there are fewer excuses because the president can't claim that he was kept out of the loop. No, this is his doing. Indeed he imagined this would be heralded as a great strategic victory.

Why has it degenerated into a fiasco? (When Chris Matthews and the Wall Street editorial board both slam a decision, you know it really is a fiasco.) Here are four main concerns that threaten to engulf Obama:

1. The White House feels compelled to embellish if not outright deceive the public and media when it gets in hot water. Now the press is beginning to call him on it. National security adviser Susan Rice says Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl served with distinction. The White House says failing to alert Congress was all an oversight. Neither story holds up. ...

Max Boot posts on how the Taliban has been rescued from the ashheap of George W. Bush's history.

A lot has changed in warfare since the days of hand-to-hand combat with swords and spears in ancient Mesopotamia 5,000 years. One thing hasn't changed, however: War remains a test of wills. If you break the enemy's will, you win. If he breaks your will, you lose. If neither of your wills is broken, and assuming you have sufficient material resources to continue fighting, the war becomes a stalemate. This is a fundamental truth and yet one that President Obama seems to miss time after time.

In Afghanistan, U.S. forces and their Afghan allies have dealt defeat after defeat to the Taliban. Yet the president keeps showing that his will is wavering by attaching deadlines to U.S. troop deployments, the most recent being a promise that, while 9,800 U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan in 2015, all of them will depart by the end of 2016. The latest sign of wavering American will, at least from the Taliban's standpoint, is the prisoner exchange for Bowe Bergdahl.

The Taliban are going to town with a video of the exchange that has become an Internet sensation. The message of the video is obvious: the Taliban are a force to be reckoned with. The U.S. has tried to portray the Taliban as mere terrorists who are on the wrong side of history, but the fact of this exchange bolsters the Taliban's narrative that they are actually a legitimate governmental entity that will one day rule Afghanistan again. ...

Scott Johnson posts on the mullahs read of our country.

In another harsh editorial — “Hapless Obama” — the New York Daily News reports on the mullahs’ reading of Obama:

“Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has bluntly taken the measure of President Obama as a paper tiger — and the United States commander has only himself to blame.

Delivering an address on a stage hung with a banner that read “America cannot do a damn thing,” Khamenei Wednesday sneeringly declared that Obama has abandoned military force as a tool of foreign policy. ...”

Now for important stuff. Free Beacon reports the GOP might pick up a Senate seat in Iowa.

The U.S. Senate race in Iowa is now in a dead heat after Republican candidate Joni Ernst secured a primary win on Tuesday, according to a recent poll by Rasmussen Reports.

Ernst—a state senator and Iraq War veteran who still serves as a lieutenant colonel in the Iowa Army National Guard—received 45 percent support in the poll, while Rep. Bruce Braley (D., Iowa) garnered 44 percent. The survey of 750 likely Iowa voters had a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percent.

The poll indicates a bump in support for Ernst, who trailed Braley by about 7 percentage points in early April, according to a survey at the time by Suffolk University. ...

Father's day is coming soon. The NY Times reviews a book; "Do Father's Matter?" *When our young daughters first decided to play on top of our Honda minivan, parked in our driveway, my wife was worried. But to me, it seemed no less safe than chasing a ball that frequently ended up in the street. And they loved the height, the novelty, the danger. So I let them stay. They never fell. And with the summer weather here, playing on the car is once again keeping them occupied for hours.*

Now that I have read Paul Raeburn’s “Do Fathers Matter?,” I know that my comfort with more dangerous play — my willingness to let my daughters stand on top of a minivan — is a typically paternal trait. Dads roughhouse with children more, too. They also gain weight when their wives are pregnant and have an outsize effect on their children’s vocabulary. The presence of dads can delay daughters’ puberty. But older dads have more children with dwarfism and with Marfan syndrome.

In Mr. Raeburn’s book, there is plenty of good news for dads, and plenty of bad. A zippy tour through the latest research on fathers’ distinctive, or predominant, contributions to their children’s lives, “Do Fathers Matter?” is filled with provocative studies of human dads — not to mention a lot of curious animal experiments. (You’ll learn about blackbirds’ vasectomies.) But above all, Mr. Raeburn shows how little we know about the role of fathers, and how preliminary his book is. Its end is really a beginning, a prospectus for further research. ...

WSJ

Release of Taliban Detainees Alarms Afghan Villagers

Some Recall Scorched-Earth Offensive Led by One of the Freed Prisoners

by Nathan Hodges

SHEYKHAN, Afghanistan—Taliban forces led by Mohammed Fazl swept through this village on the Shomali plain north of Kabul in 1999 in a scorched-earth offensive that prompted some 300,000 people to flee for their lives.

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"There was not a single undamaged house or garden," said Masjidi Fatehzada, a shopkeeper in Mir Bacha Kot, the district center. "My entire shop was burned to the ground. There was nothing left."

Khwaja Mohammad, a farmer in the village of Sheykhan, remembered how Mr. Fazl's men took away his son, a civilian, and sent him to Kabul's Pul-e Charkhi prison.

"They jailed him for nearly three years," Mr. Mohammad said. "They took him when he was on his way from the bazaar to buy oil and flour."

The release of Mr. Fazl and the four other Guantanamo detainees has become a hot-button political issue in both Afghanistan and the U.S. Critics complain that the Obama administration has freed some of the most dangerous militants.

One day after Sgt. Bergdahl's release, the Afghan government protested the swap because it placed restrictions on the five, saying it sought "unconditional freedom of its citizens." Under the agreement, brokered by Qatar, the five Taliban leaders are supposed to live in the Persian Gulf emirate under supervision for the next 12 months to prevent them from returning to violence.

Kabul's protest underscored mistrust between Kabul and Washington at a delicate moment when the U.S. is preparing to drastically reduce its military presence in the country and a new Afghan president is about to be elected.

En route to Afghanistan on Sunday, U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel acknowledged that the U.S. government had only informed the Afghan government about the swap after the fact.

The release has been a boon for the Taliban.

Shortly after the exchange, the group posted a video of them receiving a hero's welcome in Qatar.

Mullah Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil, the minister of foreign affairs in the Taliban regime that was ousted by the 2001 U.S.-led invasion, described the exchange as "an achievement for the Taliban" which gave the militant group a form of recognition.

"In terms of military significance, Fazl was the most important" among the freed Guantanamo prisoners, Mr. Muttawakil added.

Still, he thought Mr. Fazl and the four other freed detainees are more likely to pursue a political role in a potential peace process with Kabul rather than return to the battlefield.

Another former Guantanamo detainee, Mullah Abdul Qayum Zakir, was the Taliban's main military commander until stepping down, ostensibly for health reasons, earlier this year.

In addition to Mr. Fazl, other released detainees also played major roles in the former Taliban regime. Khairullah Khairkhwa, a minister of interior in the former Taliban government, served as the militant group's liaison to al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, according to a 2008 Pentagon assessment. Noorullah Noori, once a senior Taliban military commander in northern Afghanistan, led Taliban forces against the U.S. and its Northern Alliance allies during the 2001 invasion, according to the Pentagon.

Pentagon assessments describe the two other former prisoners, Mohammed Nabi Omari and Abdul Haq Wasiq, as linked to other Islamic extremist groups, including al Qaeda.

Among the five, however, Mr. Fazl stands out as one with the strongest ties to involvement in wartime atrocities, Afghans familiar with the Taliban and human-rights groups say.

"Fazl is the case among the five where there is clear evidence that he had command responsibility for forces that committed atrocities," said Patricia Gossman, a researcher with the advocacy group Human Rights Watch who has studied crimes committed during the Afghan civil war. "Shomali is the place where he was on the ground."

Ms. Gossman added that evidence also places Mr. Fazl on the scene of a massacre of civilians in the Yakawlang district of central Bamyan province in January 2001. All of the parties in Afghanistan's civil war that began in the 1990s were involved in atrocities and rights abuses, according to researchers.

"Relatively speaking, his crimes were no greater than those of many of the people the U.S. and other NATO countries have been happy to work with since 2001, including men who were involved in massacres," said Kate Clark of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, a Kabul-based research group.

Taliban officials couldn't immediately be reached for comment on Mr. Fazl or his role in these events.

Both candidates contesting the June 14 presidential election runoff have civil-war-era warlords accused of atrocities by human rights groups as their vice-presidential candidates.

Former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani selected Uzbek former warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum as a running mate; his rival, former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, is running with ethnic Hazara former warlord Mohammad Mohaqeq.

On the Shomali plain, however, memories are still raw about the alleged role of Mr. Fazl and his men in war crimes.



Taliban figure Mohammed Fazl

Dil Agha, who was a young Northern Alliance fighter in 1999, said he escaped to the Panjshir Valley, an anti-Taliban redoubt, after the Shomali front line collapsed under the Taliban offensive.

"When I came back from Panjshir, this whole place was completely destroyed," he said. "There wasn't a single building standing."

Months after the collapse of the Taliban regime in late 2001, the Shomali plain was still a wasteland littered with unexploded ordnance. Mine-clearance teams had barely begun the painstaking work of sweeping away the detritus of war, and many of the newly returned refugees from the fighting were still living in tents.

Assadullah, a local schoolteacher, still walks with a limp. He showed a reporter a bullet wound he said he received after was shot in the leg by the Taliban after trying to escape arrest.

"Taliban demanded I surrender a gun, but I told them I was a schoolteacher and I didn't have one," he said.

Khwaja Gul Ahmad, a 74-year-old farmer, said his son, Khwaja Ibrahim, was killed by Taliban artillery fire during the fighting in Shomali.

Standing by the grave of his son, Mr. Ahmad's eyes welled with tears when he learned about Mr. Fazl's release from a reporter. "If he is released, he will burn our houses again because he doesn't shake hands with the government," Mr. Ahmad said.

Twitter

[Rep. Steve Stockman @SteveWorks4You 22h](#)

The Bergdahl swap crystallizes all that is Obama:

A man who won't let obeying the law stop him from making a bad decision.

Washington Post

[Free him, then try him](#)

by Charles Krauthammer

What is it with Susan Rice and the Sunday morning talk shows? This time she said Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl had served in Afghanistan "[with honor and distinction](#)" — the biggest whopper since she insisted the [Benghazi attack was caused by a video](#).

There is [strong eyewitness evidence](#) that Bergdahl deserted his unit and that the search for him endangered his fellow soldiers. If he had served with honor and distinction, there would be no national uproar over his ransom and some of the widely aired objections to the deal would be as muted as they are flimsy. For example:

1. *America doesn't negotiate with terrorists.*

Nonsense. Of course we do. Everyone does, while pretending not to. The Israelis, by necessity the toughest of all anti-terror fighters, [in 2011 gave up 1,027 prisoners](#), some with blood on their hands, for one captured staff sergeant.

2. *The administration did not give Congress 30-day notice as required by law.*

Of all the jurisdictional disputes between president and Congress, the president stands on the firmest ground as commander in chief. And commanders have the power to negotiate prisoner exchanges.

Moreover, from where did this sudden assertion of congressional prerogative spring? After five years of supine acquiescence to President Obama's multiple usurpations, Congress suddenly becomes exercised over a war power — where its claim is weakest. Congress does nothing in the face of [23 executive alterations](#) of the president's own Affordable Care Act. It does nothing when [Obama essentially enacts](#) by executive order the Dream Act, which Congress had refused to enact. It does nothing when the Justice Department [unilaterally rewrites drug laws](#). And now it rises indignantly on its hind legs because it didn't get [30 days' notice of a prisoner swap](#)?

3. *The Taliban release endangers national security.*

Indeed it does. The [five released detainees](#) are unrepentant, militant and dangerous. They're likely to go back into the field and resume their war against local and foreign infidels, especially us.

The [administration pretense](#) that we and the Qataris will monitor them is a joke. They can start planning against us tonight. And if they decide to leave Qatar tomorrow, who's going to stop them?

The administration might have tried honesty here and said: Yes, we gave away five important combatants. But that's what you do to redeem hostages. In such exchanges, the West always gives more than it gets for the simple reason that we value individual human life more than do the barbarians with whom we deal.

No shame here, merely a lamentable reality. So why does the Bergdahl deal rankle? Because of how he became captive in the first place. That's the real issue. He [appears to have deserted](#), perhaps even defected.

The distinction is important. If he's a defector — joined the enemy to fight against his country — then he deserves no freeing. Indeed, he deserves killing, the [way we kill other enemies](#) in the field, the way we killed Anwar al-Awlaki, an American who had openly joined al-Qaeda. A U.S. passport does not entitle a traitor to any special protection. (Caveat: If a POW is turned, Stockholm-syndrome-like, *after* falling captive, these condemnatory considerations don't apply.)

Assume, however — and we will find out soon enough — that Bergdahl was not a defector. Simply wanted out — a deserter who walked or wandered away from his duty and his comrades for reasons as yet unknown. Do you bargain for a deserter?

Two imperatives should guide the answer. Bergdahl remains a member of the U.S. military and therefore is (a) subject to military justice and (b) subject to the soldiers' creed that we don't leave anyone behind.

What to do? Free him, then try him. Make the swap and then, if the evidence is as strong as it now seems, court-martial him for desertion.

The swap itself remains, nonetheless, a very close call. I would fully respect a president who rejected the deal as simply too unbalanced. What is impossible to respect is a president who makes this heart-wrenching deal and then does a [victory lap in the Rose Garden](#) and has his senior officials declare it a cause for celebration. The ever dutiful, ever clueless Susan Rice hailed it as "an extraordinary day for America."

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Right Turn

[Obama feeling the heat from Taliban terrorist trade](#)

by Jennifer Rubin

The [Taliban terrorist trade](#) is beginning to crowd out other scandals. As with the Veterans Affairs fiasco, the outrage is not partisan. Democrats are irate that Congress was not alerted about the prisoner swap while Republicans are beside themselves over the idea of negotiating with and releasing terrorists. Both sides have huge doubts that the trade was in our favor and deep concerns that the deal doesn't restrict the terrorists' ability to return to the battlefield. For President Obama, there are fewer excuses because the president can't claim that he was kept out of the loop. No, this is his doing. Indeed he imagined this would be heralded as a great strategic victory.

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1. *The White House feels compelled to embellish if not outright deceive the public and media when it gets in hot water.* Now the press is beginning to call him on it. National security adviser Susan Rice says Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl served with distinction. The White House says failing to alert Congress was all an oversight. Neither story holds up.

2. *The administration would rather mislead than let on the extent of its claim to executive primacy.* Former attorney general [Michael Mukasey](#) writes:

[The] [Obama administration has apologized](#) only for the least of the president's transgressions in this sorry affair: his failure to consult Congress 30 days in advance of freeing any Guantanamo detainees, as required by the National Defense Authorization Act. At the time the president signed that law he issued an accompanying signing statement taking the position, I believe probably correctly, that the law is unconstitutional as a restriction on his Article II executive powers. However, his own criticism of his predecessor for alleged misuse of executive authority apparently left him diffident about relying on that, so he relied instead on two excuses with neither legal nor factual basis: concern for the rapid deterioration of [Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl's health](#), which does not explain why no notice was given; and simple neglect due to the rush of events, which contradicts the first.

3. *The terrorists' senior-level association with the Taliban, 9/11 training and relative freedom in Qatar have many convinced that the president doesn't take the war against jihadism seriously.* In this case, perception is reality; the lack of American seriousness encourages jihadis and frightens responsible players.

4. *The administration's spin machine is on the fritz.* Obama's obvious shock that his handiwork is not being lauded as a great triumph tells us that no one in the White House has the critical eye, sound judgment and sway with Obama to stop him from doing dumb things. His own judgment is so out of whack that Americans have begun to feel the president is inattentive or determined to deny reality. The White House is not having much luck in silencing the military and or former officials who are bitterly criticizing the move.

The result is a nightmare for the president's reputation, for our bargaining position in talks with the Taliban, for the now petrified Afghan government and people and for the troops and their families who now fear an uptick in kidnapping and who feel betrayed by the commander in chief.

Congress has limited tools at its disposal, but oversight hearings seem to be the place to start. Even with oversight hearings, the bell can't be unrung, so whatever message of weakness and obliviousness Obama has sent can't be retracted. No wonder the president's ratings on foreign policy are sinking like a stone.

Contentions

[Bergdahl Starring in Taliban's PR Blockbuster](#)

by Max Boot

A lot has changed in warfare since the days of hand-to-hand combat with swords and spears in ancient Mesopotamia 5,000 years. One thing hasn't changed, however: War remains a test of wills. If you break the enemy's will, you win. If he breaks your will, you lose. If neither of your wills is broken, and assuming you have sufficient material resources to continue fighting, the war becomes a stalemate. This is a fundamental truth and yet one that President Obama seems to miss time after time.

In Afghanistan, U.S. forces and their Afghan allies have dealt defeat after defeat to the Taliban. Yet the president keeps showing that his will is wavering by attaching deadlines to U.S. troop deployments, the most recent being a promise that, while 9,800 U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan in 2015, all of them will depart by the end of 2016. The latest sign of wavering American will, at least from the Taliban's standpoint, is the prisoner exchange for Bowe Bergdahl.

The Taliban are going to town with a video of the exchange that has become an Internet sensation. The message of the video is obvious: the Taliban are a force to be reckoned with. The U.S. has tried to portray the Taliban as mere terrorists who are on the wrong side of history, but the fact of this exchange bolsters the Taliban's narrative that they are actually a legitimate governmental entity that will one day rule Afghanistan again. The Taliban's video producers pulled out all the stops to depict the exchange as a shameful surrender for America. As [one news account](#) notes, "For the insurgents, getting the five men back was 'blissful news' and a 'historic achievement,' the narrator says, which 'filled up the eyes of all Muslims with tears of happiness.' "

For most ordinary Afghans—whose allegiance is the ultimate prize in this conflict—the exchange was disconcerting news. As the *Wall Street Journal* [reports](#), "Fifteen years later, local residents here are responding with fear and dismay to the U.S. release of the notorious commander [Mohammed Fazl], along with four other Taliban leaders in exchange for Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, the only American prisoner of war who was held by the Taliban."

The reactions of this residents of the Shomali Plain is easy to explain, since they remember all too well how Fazl and his goons terrorized them. As the Journal notes: "When the Taliban seized control of this area from their Northern Alliance rivals in 1999, they systematically demolished entire villages, blowing up houses, burning fields and seeding the land with mines, according to two comprehensive studies of war crimes and atrocities during wars in Afghanistan and human rights reports. Mr. Fazl played a major role in the destruction."

What kind of message does it send to these Afghans when the U.S. has been coerced into letting Fazl and four other notorious terrorists go free? That will be seen as a rebuttal of Kabul's and Washington's claims that the Taliban cannot win. After all they have just won a big concession—and they can expect more gains once the US pulls out. It may not turn out that way, because the Afghan security forces are increasingly capable of defending their own country—but why give the

Taliban hope just when they are reeling from numerous setbacks, most recently the successful presidential election?

Power Line

The mullahs read Obama

by Scott Johnson

In another harsh editorial — [“Hapless Obama”](#) — the New York Daily News reports on the mullahs’ reading of Obama:

Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has bluntly taken the measure of President Obama as a paper tiger — and the United States commander has only himself to blame.

Delivering an address on a stage hung with a banner that read “America cannot do a damn thing,” Khamenei Wednesday sneeringly declared that Obama has abandoned military force as a tool of foreign policy.

“They realized that military attacks are as dangerous or even more dangerous for the assaulting country as they are for the country attacked,” Khamenei said, adding: “They have renounced the idea of any military actions.”

The Daily News concurs in the mullahs’ judgment. Referring to Obama’s West Point commencement speech last week, the Daily News editors add: “Distressingly, the ayatollah’s pronouncement was a fair reading of the global philosophy presented by Obama last week, in a speech that was designed to explain his principles of international relations.”

The mullahs have had Obama’s number for some time. The fact that the Daily News now takes note represents another piece of evidence that we have entered the Killer Rabbit phase of the Obama presidency.

Free Beacon

Joni Ernst Now in Dead Heat with Bruce Braley

Trailed Braley in April poll



State Sen. Joni Ernst

The U.S. Senate race in Iowa is now in a dead heat after Republican candidate Joni Ernst secured a primary win on Tuesday, according to a recent poll by Rasmussen Reports.

[Ernst](#)—a state senator and Iraq War veteran who still serves as a lieutenant colonel in the Iowa Army National Guard—[received](#) 45 percent support in the poll, while Rep. Bruce Braley (D., Iowa) garnered 44 percent. The survey of 750 likely Iowa voters had a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percent.

The poll indicates a bump in support for Ernst, who [trailed](#) Braley by about 7 percentage points in early April, according to a survey at the time by Suffolk University.

Braley has faced a torrent of criticism in recent weeks from Republicans who say he is elitist and out of touch with Iowa voters. He [called](#) Sen. Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa) “a farmer from Iowa who never went to law school” at a January fundraiser—comments that rankled many in the farmer-heavy state—and committed other missteps such as misspelling basic Iowa farming terms in a press release and pasting a photo of an English fruit farm to his Facebook page.

He has also been [criticized](#) for accepting thousands in donations from the national trial lawyers’ lobby and advocating for their interests in Congress.

Additionally, critics have decried Braley’s [latest ad](#) as sexist and [misleading](#). The ad features a baby chick and says that “we didn’t hear a peep” from Ernst while she has been in the state senate about cutting spending.

“Imagine if a GOP candidate had used a ‘chick’ in an ad against a female opponent,” tweeted Tim Hagle, political scientist at the University of Iowa.

NY Times

[Relevant? Nurturing? Well, So’s Your Old Man](#)

‘Do Fathers Matter?’ Shows Why They Do

by Mark Oppenheimer



Paul Raeburn

When our young daughters first decided to play on top of our Honda minivan, parked in our driveway, my wife was worried. But to me, it seemed no less safe than chasing a ball that frequently ended up in the street. And they loved the height, the novelty, the danger. So I let them stay. They never fell. And with the summer weather here, playing on the car is once again keeping them occupied for hours.

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In Mr. Raeburn's book, there is plenty of good news for dads, and plenty of bad. A zippy tour through the latest research on fathers' distinctive, or predominant, contributions to their children's lives, "Do Fathers Matter?" is filled with provocative studies of human dads — not to mention a lot of curious animal experiments. (You'll learn about blackbirds' vasectomies.) But above all, Mr. Raeburn shows how little we know about the role of fathers, and how preliminary his book is. Its end is really a beginning, a prospectus for further research.

Mr. Raeburn writes that "as recently as a generation ago, in the 1970s, most psychologists" believed that "with regard to infants, especially, fathers were thought to have little or no role to play." When it came to toddlers and older children, too, the great parenting theories of the 20th century placed fathers in the background. Freud famously exalted, or damned, the mother for her influence. [John Bowlby's attachment theory](#), which he developed beginning in the 1940s, focused on the mother or "mother-figure."

When the pioneering researcher Michael E. Lamb became interested in the role of fathers, in the mid-1970s, "there wasn't much evidence for the irrelevancy of fathers" — it was just assumed, Mr. Raeburn writes. And "there wasn't a lot of data to suggest they were relevant, either."

Now, there is a growing, but still inadequate, interest in fathers' influence. Some new research explains genetic and epigenetic links that are unique to fathers and their children, while other studies explore the impact of fathers' presence or absence. In many studies, there is no clear divide between the biological and psychological: Being around dads affects children's biology, which in turn affects their mental states, like happiness, and their success in life.

Mr. Raeburn, a magazine writer and former chief science correspondent for The Associated Press, has contributed another entry to a category of books that has exploded in the past 20 years, in which a journalist compresses and enlivens scholarly articles, often mixing in reported anecdotes, to appeal to the curious, nonspecialist reader. This technique has given us the "Freakonomics" books, the works of Malcolm Gladwell and, in the parental realm, Jennifer Senior's thoughtful [All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood](#).

Aside from a few remarks about his own second marriage, and second go-round at being a dad, Mr. Raeburn is less chatty. "Do Fathers Matter?" is paragraph after paragraph of scholarly articles summarized, a Psycinfo and Jstor database clip job. It's not for grad students, but it's also not for the beach.

But Mr. Raeburn's modesty is a virtue; he has found the right style for the job. He writes clearly, untangling cause from effect, noting probabilities and inserting caveats. Preferring to claim too little rather than too much, he is an ideal guide to tricky, uncertain research in a nascent field.

Nascent, but fascinating. Did you know that a healthy father can ease the impact of a mother's [depression](#) on the children, while a depressed father is a risk factor for excessive crying in infants? That fathers can suffer from hormonal postpartum depression?

Or that fathers' early involvement with their daughters leads to "a reduced risk of early puberty, early initiation of sex and [teen pregnancy](#)"? We're not sure exactly why, but Bruce J. Ellis, of the University of Arizona, has noted that exposure to fathers' pheromones can slow down pubertal development.

According to some research, fathers matter more than mothers in vocabulary development. One hypothesis is that mothers, who spend more time with their children, know their children's vocabularies, and tailor their own word choice accordingly; dads, who know their children less well, end up introducing new words.

Older fathers are more deeply involved with their children's schools, more likely to attend ballet classes or know their children's friends. On the other hand, the children of older fathers seem to have stronger genetic predispositions to [schizophrenia](#) and [autism](#) — so much so that older dads should get genetic counseling, Mr. Raeburn argues, just as older moms hear about the risk of [Down syndrome](#).

On yet another hand, the children of older dads are taller and slimmer. So there's that. (Nobody knows why.)

As these examples suggest, father research cuts across disciplines, and Mr. Raeburn excels at mapping the twistiness of the road ahead. Fathers are more likely to roughhouse, and rough play is good for children. But how much is this kind of "masculine" play in our dad genes, and how much does it come from cues that we pick up, then pass on, telling all of us that men do the rough play? If there is no father, but there are two mothers, does one mother become more likely to do the more dadlike play?

Mr. Raeburn is perhaps a bit too careful in withholding recommendations. A more argumentative book would have called, at least, for increased paternity leave, a corporate culture more supportive of all parents, and other policies to nudge dads into their children's lives. In the meantime, however, he makes a powerful case that fathers matter. Children can grow up happy and successful with just a mother, or with two moms. But we should attend to the benefits that fathers are more likely to bring.

After all, my wife would never have let the girls on top of the minivan.

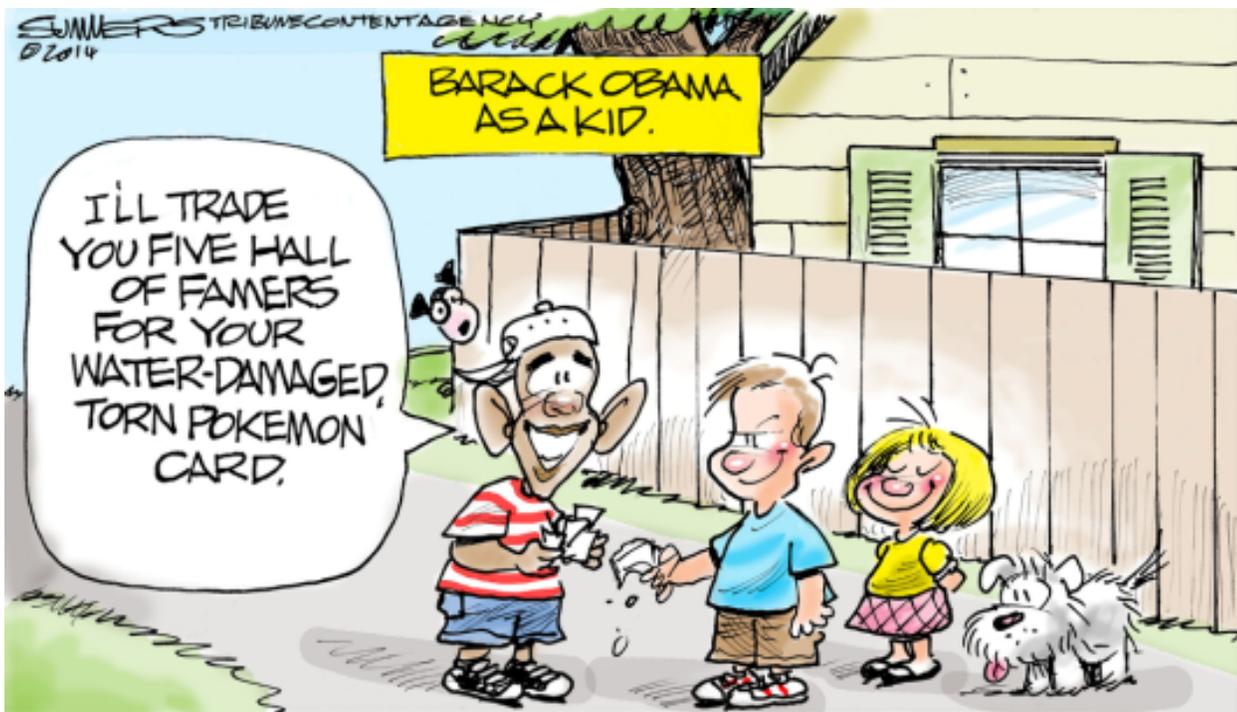
DO FATHERS MATTER?

What Science Is Telling Us About the Parent We've Overlooked

By Paul Raeburn

272 pages. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$26.

Mark Oppenheimer writes the Beliefs column, about religion, for The New York Times and the Fatherland column for The New Republic.



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Well, I guess that answers that!