

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT EVERYTHING THAT MATTERS

THE WEEK

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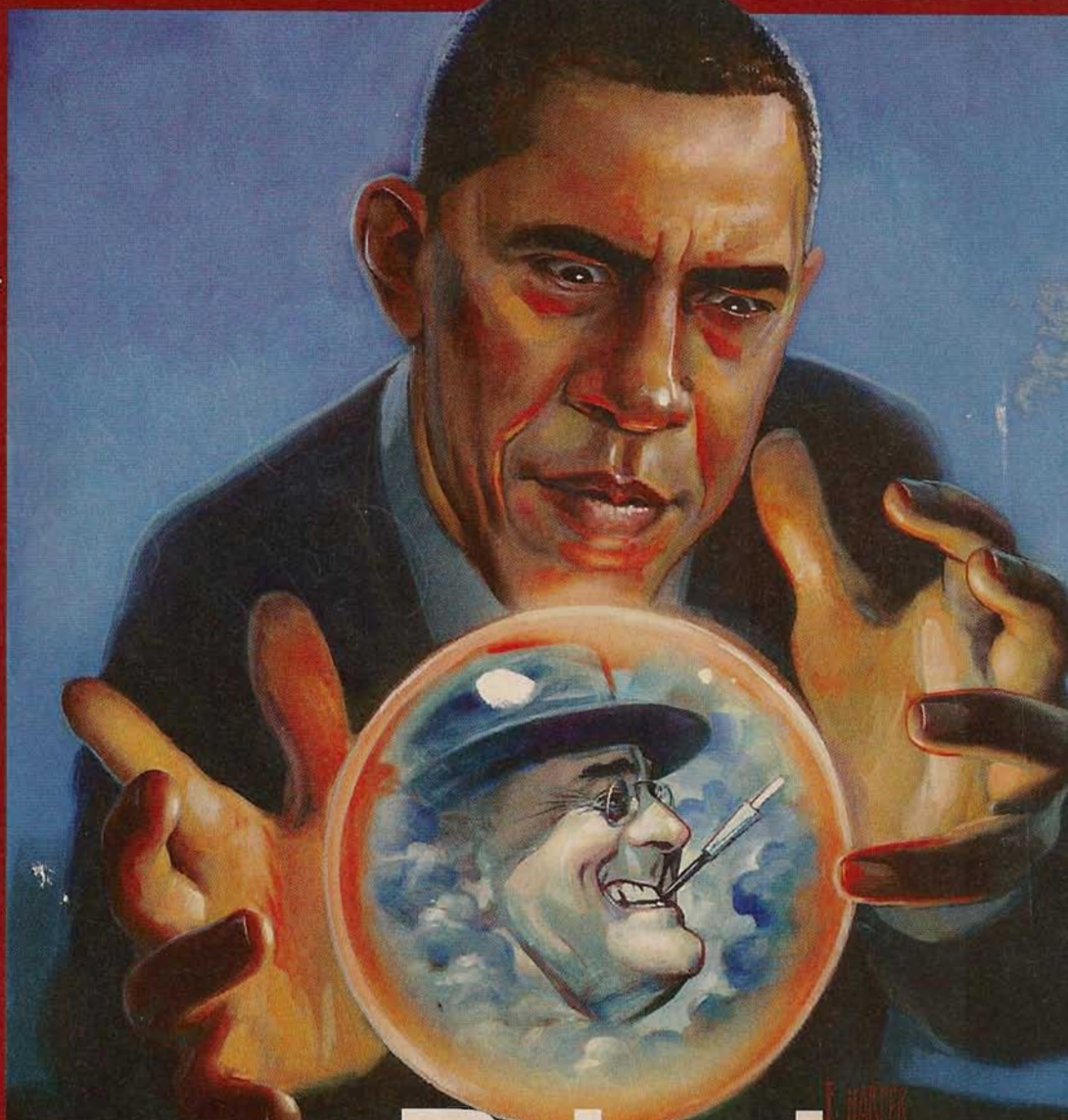
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When hospitals refuse to let people die

Craig Bowron
The Washington Post

In the past, only kings and psychopaths had delusions of immortality, said physician Craig Bowron. But in modern medicine, the pursuit of immortality is an everyday phenomenon. In the Minnesota hospital where I work, I see a steady stream of debilitated, elderly patients who are kept alive through herculean feats of technology simply because our society no longer thinks of death as a natural process. Consider my diabetic patient who started dialysis six months ago—at age 85. One leg has been amputated; the gangrenous toes on her remaining foot look like “ash dangling off a cigarette.” She’s miserable, exhausted, and in great pain. Another of my patients is a partially paralyzed, arthritis-ridden 91-year-old man who has to be moved to the toilet or gurney on a giant sling, each trip from his bed causing agony. It’s not a doctor’s role to determine whose life is worth living, but my colleagues and I—nurses, doctors, technicians—administer to these people with heavy hearts. We often feel that what we’re doing is more torture than treatment. “At some point in life, the only thing worse than dying is being kept alive.”

The false benevolence of Mother Nature

Drake Bennett
The Boston Globe

Our beloved Earth, it turns out, is quite a nasty place, said Drake Bennett. Romanticists from Thoreau to modern-day environmentalists have posited that this big blue marble is a “gargantuan, self-regulating superorganism,” its parts interacting in perfect ecological balance. Baloney, says paleontologist Peter Ward. In his new book *The Medea Hypothesis*, he argues that “rather than a supple system of checks and balances, the natural world is a doomsday device careening from one cataclysm to another.” More than 3 billion years ago, for instance, bacteria “created a planet-girdling methane smog that threatened to extinguish every living thing.” Plankton, Ward finds, once bred so madly that they devoured their entire food supply and died en masse, using up all the oxygen in the seas and causing massive extinctions. Twice in prehistoric times Earth’s vegetation ran amok and “sucked so much carbon dioxide out of the air that temperatures plunged,” nearly killing off everything alive. “In other words, it’s not just human beings, with our chemical spills, nuclear arsenals, and tailpipe emissions, who are a menace. The main threat to life is life itself.”

The sagging market for breast implants

Maura Moynihan
TheDailybeast.com

Call it “the great boob bust,” said Maura Moynihan. The mounting recession has triggered a sharp decline in plastic surgery, especially breast implants. In recent years, our national breast fetish has become sheer madness, with parents buying implants for their teenage daughters, husbands buying “surgery gift cards” for their wives, and models and actresses proudly detailing their breast augmentations on TV. Convinced that only a porn star’s “grotesquely swollen,” gravity-defying boobs will bring them love, even professional, educated women have endured pain, serious health risks, and the possibility of permanent disfigurement—all to fix a “physical inadequacy” that doesn’t exist. The numbers are astonishing. American consumers in 2007 spent more than \$12 billion on cosmetic surgery, while from 1992 to 2003, the number of breast implants increased 657 percent. But in recent months, the “porn boob” market has virtually collapsed—along with the market for gas-guzzling SUVs and jumbo mortgages. Nobody wants a recession, of course. “But a reallocation of income, from boob jobs to, say, food”—might just signal a “return to sanity.”

Quote of the week

“No great feat of imagination is needed to see how [Barack Obama’s presidency] could end in tears. The stimulus fails. Things continue to fall apart. A new Great Depression ensues. And Obama is blamed and soon enough finds himself out on the speaking circuit with pal (ahem) Bill Clinton. Yet the astonishing thing about this moment is that virtually no one is yearning for that outcome. Perhaps it’s because the exogenous circumstances are so dire, but the desire to see Obama succeed is broad and deep among citizens of all persuasions. After the past two decades of politics as total war, what a blessed and glorious relief. A president almost everyone is rooting for? That may be the newest thing of all.”

John Heilemann in New York magazine

It must be true ... I read it in the tabloids

■ A British man has finally solved the Rubik’s Cube after 26 years of trying. Construction worker Graham Parker, now 45, first picked up the puzzle in 1983 at the peak of its global popularity, and though it stymied him, he kept at it obsessively after the world moved on. “I have had wrist and back problems from spending hours on it,” said Parker, “but it was all worth it. When I clicked that last bit into place and each face was a solid color, I wept.”



Miller: Too pretty for Crowe

■ Sienna Miller has been dropped from the latest Robin Hood movie because the lithe British actress made co-star Russell Crowe, 44, look old and fat. “It’s a mess,” a source tells the *New York Post*. “Russell never lost the weight he put on for *Body of Lies*, and so the love scenes between him and Sienna would have been laughable.” Producers are frantically seeking a new Maid Marian—ideally “an older, plumper actress” who won’t make Crowe “look like a paunchy grandfather.”

■ A pig in rural China has taught himself to catch fish from a pond. The pig’s owner, whose name is Han, says she was “amazed” when she first saw the animal wade into the shallows of her tropical-fish pond and help himself to one of its occupants, and she has no intention of stopping him. The fish, says Han, are left over from a breeding business that folded when the price of tropical fish declined, and she is happy for the pig to get “a bit more protein in its diet.”