

February 1, 2012

[Craig Pirrong](#) at Streetwise Prof lists the low lights of the SOTU.

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[WSJ editors](#) say rather than a Buffett rule, perhaps Obama should call for a Solyndra rule.

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[Debra Saunders](#) thinks the president has decided to do nothing.

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Obama recalled the successful Navy SEAL mission, which under his watch took out Osama bin Laden, and observed, "the mission only succeeded because every member of that unit trusted each other - because you can't charge up those stairs, into darkness and danger, unless you know that there's someone behind you, watching your back."

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And [Mark Steyn](#) has a SOTU column.

Had I been asked to deliver the State of the Union address, it would not have delayed your dinner plans:

"The State of our Union is broke, heading for bankrupt, and total collapse shortly thereafter. Thank you and goodnight! You've been a terrific crowd!"

I gather that Americans prefer something a little more upbeat, so one would not begrudge a speechwriter fluffing it up by holding out at least the possibility of some change of fortune, however remote. Instead, President Obama assured us at great length that nothing is going to change, not now, not never. Indeed the Union's state – its unprecedented world-record brokenness – was not even mentioned.

If, as I was, you happened to be stuck at Gate 27 at one of the many U.S. airports laboring under the misapprehension that pumping CNN at you all evening long somehow adds to the gaiety of flight delays, you would have watched an address that gave no indication its speaker was even aware that the parlous state of our finances is an existential threat not only to the nation but to global stability. The message was, oh, sure, unemployment's still a little higher than it should be, and student loans are kind of expensive, and the housing market's pretty flat, but it's nothing that a little government "investment" in green jobs and rural broadband and retraining programs can't fix. In other words, more of the unaffordable same.

The president certainly had facts and figures at his disposal. He boasted that his regulatory reforms "will save business and citizens more than \$10 billion over the next five years." Wow. Ten billion smackeroos! That's some savings – and in a mere half a decade! Why, it's equivalent to what the Government of the United States borrows every 53 hours. So by midnight on Thursday, Obama had already re-borrowed all those hard-fought savings from 2017. "In the last 22 months," said the president, "businesses have created more than 3 million jobs." Impressive. But 125,000 new foreign workers arrive every month (officially). So we would have to have created 2,750,000 jobs in that period just to stand still.

Fortunately, most of the items in Obama's interminable speech will never happen, any more than the federally funded bicycling helmets or whatever fancies found their way onto Bill Clinton's extravagant shopping lists in the Nineties. ...

**Thomas Sowell** columns on CA high speed rail.

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Next month Queen Elizabeth will mark 60 years on the throne. **The Economist** reviews five new books on her.

*... as a constitutional monarch, ruling with the tacit consent of the majority, she is not the only judge of the trade-off between necessary display and indispensable discretion. The public have a say as well. Some of the queen's closest brushes with disaster have involved a lack of visibility, most painfully in 1997 when she remained in Scotland with the royal family after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. She only returned to London after pleas from her new, young prime minister, Tony Blair (and lynch-mob demands to "Show Us You Care" from the tabloids).*

*The double nature of the queen—an unusually private woman with extraordinary public duties—poses a test for all who try to write about her. Including Mr Marr's book, five new biographies have been prepared for 2012, the queen's diamond jubilee year. The authors boast of watching the queen at work, interviewing officials from the royal household and of trawling through archives. They quote family members, friends and people with a claim to know the queen.*

*In the process, all five biographers wrestle with the question neatly framed by their subject herself: if to see the queen is to believe in her, what vantage point allows the most authentic*

*experience of faith? Which queen is the most “real”, the private woman or the public figure? Each offers a different answer. ...*

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## **Streetwise Professor** **[The Orwellian SOTU Address](#)**

by Craig Pirrong

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1. Obama almost completely ignored the most important threat to the state of the Union: its parlous fiscal situation. He mentioned the issue almost in passing, and then primarily to flog his idiotic tax proposal (more on this below). He completely ignored any discussion of entitlements, and entitlement reform. This should be the overriding priority: addressing this issue, or not, will largely determine the future state of the Union. It borders on the criminal for a president allegedly giving the country an honest appraisal of the state of the nation to give such short shrift to the most crucial political and economic issue of the day. Alfred E. Newman couldn’t have done any worse.

2. He flogged his fairness and justice theme. Get ready for a hugely divisive campaign based on these issues. I was hoping there would have been a camera on Valerie Jarrett during these parts of the speech, just to see whether her lips moved when he gave it.

This was yet another paean to the European welfare state model, though of course he didn’t frame it that way. But his was the “social model” rhetoric that is standard in Germany, for instance.

Which is truly staggering, given that the European model is on the brink of extinction. They may stagger on for awhile, but that model cannot be sustained.

That’s too bad for the Europeans, but who can be so clueless, at this time, to act as if it isn’t happening? Hell, Scrooge was smart enough to pay heed to the Ghost of Christmas Future. Not our ‘Bam.

The centerpiece of the class warfare rhetoric was the Buffett Plan, as misguided a policy as could possibly be imagined. This plan would effectively raise, and raise substantially, taxes on capital. This is a horrible idea, because capital taxation is a bad idea. It is a bad idea not because it hurts plutocratic capitalists, but because it hurts the *hoi polloi* by reducing investment, thereby reducing productivity—and thus reducing wages. Capital taxation in the US is already too high. It is also dishonest beyond belief for Obama to suggest that this will make the slightest dent in the debt or deficit.

3. In a chilling ending, Mr. Anti-War appealed to martial virtues, and touted the military as a model for civil society to emulate. He praised the unity and teamwork of the military, the virtue of working together to a common goal.

Many commentators (e.g., Jonah Goldberg and George Will) jumped on this quickly as fundamentally creepy and un-American. Their takes are correct. They were particularly correct to point out that this is a standard progressive theme.

What hasn't been pointed out is how the class warfare and military-as-a-model-for-civil-society themes are going to work together—as they almost certainly will as a part of the Obama strategy. The class warfare theme is inherently divisive, and will result in heated rhetoric during the campaign. Mr. Uniter will decry this rhetoric, and wrap himself in the military, claiming that opposition is contrary to the military ideal of obedience, loyalty, and followership that we should all strive to emulate. I expect Obama to use the military as a prop during his campaign (though not at official campaign events), continuing to sing its praises as a model for civil society, thereby insinuating that political criticism disrespects the military. It would be utterly Orwellian, but mark my words.

## WSJ - Editors

### [The Solyndra Rule](#)

*Another green subsidy favorite goes belly up.*

President Obama keeps pushing the (Warren) Buffett rule that nobody making more than \$1 million a year should pay less than 30% in taxes. He'd do better by the economy if he adopted a Solyndra Rule, in which no commercial energy company should receive millions of dollars in taxpayer subsidies.

After the demise of Solyndra (with its \$535 million loan guarantee) and Beacon Power (\$43 million loan guarantee), last week saw the bankruptcy of Indiana-based lithium-ion battery maker Ener1. In 2009 an Ener1 subsidiary was awarded a grant worth up to \$118 million from the Energy Department, with Vice President Joe Biden touring and touting its factory a year ago.

Like Solyndra, Ener1 was a foolhardy bet for taxpayer cash. Founded in 2002, Ener1 had not turned a profit by the time of its grant and has proceeded to hemorrhage the \$55 million of the DOE money it has received to date. Its losses in fiscal 2010 were \$165 million.

The company has had to compete in a market with a glut of battery makers, all of which are selling into a lackluster electric-car market. This battery glut was created in substantial part by the Obama Administration, which handed out money to no fewer than 48 different battery technology and electric vehicle projects in 2009.

In the small favors department, defenders of the White House's green corporate welfare are noting that, unlike Solyndra, Ener1 is not closing its doors while in bankruptcy. Then again, Ener1 has created fewer than 400 of the 1,700 jobs it had promised by this year, and a successful restructuring is by no means assured.

Mr. Obama is undeterred. In last week's speech, he defended his taxpayer "investments" in private commercial companies, noting that "some technologies don't pan out, some companies fail." He would know. Though perhaps if Mr. Obama weren't throwing hundreds of millions down the green sinkhole, he wouldn't have to target the nation's real job creators for higher taxes to foot his losses.

## San Francisco Chronicle

### [Obama's game plan: Do nothing](#)

by Debra J. Saunders

Toward the end of his State of the Union speech, President Obama observed that Washington politicians should learn from the example of the U.S. military: "When you're marching into battle, you look out for the person next to you, or the mission fails."

Obama recalled the successful Navy SEAL mission, which under his watch took out Osama bin Laden, and observed, "the mission only succeeded because every member of that unit trusted each other - because you can't charge up those stairs, into darkness and danger, unless you know that there's someone behind you, watching your back."

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Consider the White House decision on the Keystone XL pipeline. Last week the administration announced that the president denied the project because of "a rushed and arbitrary deadline" of Feb. 21 embedded in a two-month extension of the 2011 payroll-tax holiday. "I'm disappointed that Republicans in Congress forced this decision," the president lamented.

Obama also lauded the military toward the beginning of his address. "They focus on the mission at hand. They work together," he noted. "Imagine what we could accomplish if we followed their example."

I can imagine it, but what I see is a president who nixed a shovel-ready job-rich pipeline project that had been under review since 2008, and had passed State Department vetting twice - without exhausting every effort to approve the pipeline, or extend the deadline.

Ryan Lizza wrote an illuminating piece on [Obama's](#) "post-post-partisan presidency" in the current New Yorker. As Lizza reported, in 2004 and 2008 Obama framed himself as a Democrat who was above hyper-partisanship. Yet a year into his presidency, a Gallup poll showed Obama to be "the most polarizing first-year president in history - that is, the difference between Democratic approval of him and Republican disapproval was the highest ever recorded."

Lizza wrongly, I think, concludes: "At this political juncture, there appears to be only one real model of effective governance in Washington: political dominance, in which a president with large majorities in Congress can push through an ambitious agenda."

Last month Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest told Politico that extending the two-month payroll-tax holiday "is essentially the last must-do item of business" the president has with Congress. After that, "in terms of the president's relationship with Congress in 2012 ... the president is no longer tied to Washington, D.C."

In other words, Obama can only govern if Democrats control both houses. Until then, he has taken his marbles and gone home. As Steve Jobs described his dealings with Obama to biographer Walter Isaacson, "The president is very smart. But he kept explaining to us reasons why things can't get done."

## **Orange County Register**

### **Sorry, Newt. Only the debt ceiling will reach the moon**

by Mark Steyn

Had I been asked to deliver the State of the Union address, it would not have delayed your dinner plans:

"The State of our Union is broke, heading for bankrupt, and total collapse shortly thereafter. Thank you and goodnight! You've been a terrific crowd!"

I gather that Americans prefer something a little more upbeat, so one would not begrudge a speechwriter fluffing it up by holding out at least the possibility of some change of fortune, however remote. Instead, President Obama assured us at great length that nothing is going to change, not now, not never. Indeed the Union's state – its unprecedented world-record brokenness – was not even mentioned.

If, as I was, you happened to be stuck at Gate 27 at one of the many U.S. airports laboring under the misapprehension that pumping CNN at you all evening long somehow adds to the gaiety of flight delays, you would have watched an address that gave no indication its speaker was even aware that the parlous state of our finances is an existential threat not only to the nation but to global stability. The message was, oh, sure, unemployment's still a little higher than it should be, and student loans are kind of expensive, and the housing market's pretty flat, but it's nothing that a little government "investment" in green jobs and rural broadband and retraining programs can't fix. In other words, more of the unaffordable same.

The president certainly had facts and figures at his disposal. He boasted that his regulatory reforms "will save business and citizens more than \$10 billion over the next five years." Wow. Ten billion smackeros! That's some savings – and in a mere half a decade! Why, it's equivalent to what the Government of the United States borrows every 53 hours. So by midnight on Thursday, Obama had already re-borrowed all those hard-fought savings from 2017. "In the last 22 months," said the president, "businesses have created more than 3 million jobs." Impressive. But 125,000 new foreign workers arrive every month (officially). So we would have to have created 2,750,000 jobs in that period just to stand still.

Fortunately, most of the items in Obama's interminable speech will never happen, any more than the federally funded bicycling helmets or whatever fancies found their way onto Bill Clinton's extravagant shopping lists in the Nineties. At the time, the excuse for Clinton's mountain of legislative molehills was that all the great battles had been won, and, in the absence of a menacing Russian bear, what else did a president have to focus on except criminalizing toilet tanks over 1.6 gallons. President Obama does not enjoy the same dispensation, and any historians stumbling upon a surviving DVD while sifting through the ruins of our civilization will marvel at how his accumulation of delusional trivialities was apparently taken seriously by the assembled political class.

An honest leader would feel he owed it to the citizenry to impress upon them one central truth – that we can't have any new programs because we've spent all the money. It's gone. The cupboard is bare. What's Obama's plan to restock it? "Right now, Warren Buffett pays a lower tax rate than his secretary," the president told us. "Asking a billionaire to pay at least as much as his secretary in taxes? Most Americans would call that common sense."

But why stop there? Americans need affordable health care and affordable Master's Degrees in Climate Change and Social Justice Studies, so why not take everything that Warren Buffett's got? After all, if you confiscated the total wealth of the Forbes 400 richest Americans it would come to \$1.5 trillion.

Which is just a wee bit less than the federal shortfall in just one year of Obama-size budgets. 2011 deficit: \$1.56 trillion. But maybe for 2012 a whole new Forbes 400 of Saudi princes and Russian oligarchs will emigrate to the Hamptons and Malibu and keep the whole class-warfare thing going for a couple more years.

The so-called "Buffett Rule" is indicative not so much of "common sense" as of the ever-widening gap between the Brobdingnagian problem and the Lilliputian solutions proposed by our leaders. Obama can sacrifice the virgin daughters of every American millionaire on the altar of government spending, and the debt gods will barely notice so much as to give a perfunctory belch of acknowledgement. The president's first term has added \$5 trillion to the debt – a degree of catastrophe unique to us. In an Obama budget, the entire cost of the Greek government would barely rate a line-item. Debt-to-GDP and other comparative measures are less relevant than the hard-dollar numbers: It's not just that American government has outspent America's ability to fund it, but that it's outspending the planet's.

Who gets this? Not enough of us – which is exactly how Obama likes it. His only "big idea" – that it should be illegal (by national fiat) to drop out of school before your 18th birthday – betrays his core belief: that more is better, as long as it's government-mandated, government-regulated, government-staffed – and funded by you, or Warren Buffett, or the Chinese Politburo, or whoever's left out there.

What of his likely rivals this November? Those of us who have lived in once-great decaying polities recognize the types. Jim Callaghan, Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street in the Seventies, told a friend of mine that he saw his job as managing Britain's decline as gracefully as possible. The United Kingdom certainly declined on his watch, though not terribly gracefully. In last Monday's debate, Newt Gingrich revived the line and accused by implication Mitt Romney of having no higher ambition than to "manage the decline." Running on platitudinous generalities, Mitt certainly betrays little sense that he grasps the scale of the crisis. After a fiery assault by Rick Santorum on Romney's support for an individual mandate in health care, Mitt



sneered back at Rick that "it wasn't worth getting angry over." Which may be a foretaste of the energy he would bring to any attempted course correction in Washington.

Newt, meanwhile, has committed himself to a lunar colony by the end of his second term, and, while pandering to an audience on Florida's "Space Coast," he added that, as soon as there were 13,000 American settlers on the moon, they could apply for statehood. Ah, the old frontier spirit: I hear Laura Ingalls Wilder is already working on "Little House In The Crater."

Maybe Newt's on to something. Except for the statehood part. One day, when America gets the old foreclosure notice in the mail, wouldn't it be nice to close up the entire joint, put the keys in an envelope, slide it under the door of the First National Bank of Shanghai, and jet off on Newt's Starship Government-Sponsored Enterprise?

There are times for dreaming big dreams, and there are times to wake up. This country will not be going to the moon, any more than will be the British or French. Because, in decline, the horizons shrivel. The only thing that's going to be on the moon is the debt ceiling. Before we can make any more giant leaps for mankind, we have to make one small, dull, prosaic, earthbound step here at home – and stop. Stop the massive expansion of microregulatory government, and then reverse it. Obama has vowed to press on. If Romney and Gingrich can't get serious about it, he'll get his way.

## **Jewish World Review**

### **Getting Nowhere, Very Fast**

by Thomas Sowell

California has a huge state debt and Washington has a huge national debt. But that does not discourage either Governor Jerry Brown or President Barack Obama from wanting to launch a very costly high-speed rail system.

Most of us might be a little skittish about spending money if we were teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. But the beauty of politics is that it is all other people's money, including among those other people generations yet unborn.

The high-speed rail system proposed for California has been envisioned as a model for similar systems elsewhere in the United States. A recent story in the San Francisco Chronicle used the high-speed rail system in Spain as an analogy for California.

Spain is about the same size as California, and has a similar population density — and population density is the key to the economic viability of mass transportation, from subways to high-speed rail.

It so happens that I have ridden on Spain's high-speed rail system. It was very nice, especially since I did not have to pay the full costs, which were subsidized by the Spanish taxpayers.

While the Spanish government has been subsidizing the passengers on its high-speed rail system, the European Union has been subsidizing the Spanish government. Someone once said that government is the illusion that we can all live off somebody else. Spain's high-speed

rail system is not even covering its operating costs, never mind the enormous costs of setting up the system in the first place. One reason is that half the seats are empty in the high-speed trains in Spain.

That is what happens when you don't have the population density required for passengers to cover the operating costs. You would need the hordes of Genghis Khan riding the high-speed rail system to cover the additional costs of the rails and the trains.

An economics professor at the University of Barcelona says that Spain "has not recovered one single euro from the infrastructure investment."

The most famous high-speed rail system is that in Japan, one of the most densely populated countries in the world. The "bullet train" between Tokyo and Osaka has 130 million riders a year. Tokyo alone has more than three times the population of San Francisco and Los Angeles put together.

In California, an element of farce has been added to the impending economic tragedy, if the envisioned high-speed rail system actually materializes.

The first leg of the system is planned to run between Fresno and Bakersfield. If those names don't ring a bell with you, there is a reason. They are modest-sized communities out in the agricultural San Joaquin Valley, well removed from San Francisco or Los Angeles.

You can bet the rent money that high-speed rail traffic between Fresno and Bakersfield will never come within shouting distance of covering the operating costs. Some people have analogized putting such a rail line between these two towns to the infamous "bridge to nowhere" in Alaska.

Why are they doing it? Because they can.

If they began this project where they want it to go — between San Francisco and Los Angeles — they would run into so much opposition from the environmentalists, and from local politicians influenced by the environmentalists, that the delays could take the high-speed rail advocates beyond the time limit for using the federal subsidy money. But the green fanatics have not yet taken over politically out in the San Joaquin Valley.

The only reason for even thinking about building a high-speed rail line between Fresno and Bakersfield is just to get the project underway with federal money, making it politically more difficult to stop the larger project for a similar rail line between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

In other words, they are going to start wasting money out in the valley, so that they will be able to waste more money later on, along the coast. This may not make any sense economically, but it can make sense politically for Jerry Brown and Barack Obama.

An old song ended, "You've been running around in circles, getting nowhere — getting nowhere very fast." On high-speed rail.

## The Economist

### Queen Elizabeth II - Royal bow

*Why the queen has to be seen to be believed*



**The Real Elizabeth: An Intimate Portrait of Queen Elizabeth II.** By Andrew Marr. *Henry Holt*; 349 pages; \$32. Published in Britain as *"The Diamond Queen: Elizabeth II and Her People"* by Macmillan; £25. Buy from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)

**Queen Elizabeth II: Her Life in Our Times.** By Sarah Bradford. *Viking*; 305 pages; £20. Buy from [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)

**A Brief Life of the Queen.** By Robert Lacey. *Duckworth Overlook*; 166 pages; £9.99. T. Buy from [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)

**Our Queen.** By Robert Hardman. *Hutchinson*; 356 pages; £20. To be published in America in April as *"Her Majesty: Queen Elizabeth II and her Court"* by Pegasus; \$27.95. Buy from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)

**Elizabeth the Queen: The Life of a Modern Monarch.** By Sally Bedell Smith. *Random House*; 663 pages; \$30. *Penguin*; £6.99. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)

BEING on show is a serious business for Queen Elizabeth II who acceded to the throne 60 years ago next month. On royal tours and walkabouts, she is careful to choose bright colours and small-brimmed hats, glides through crowds "like a liner" and seemingly never tires. "Oh look! She's keeled over again," the queen once noted at a stifling-hot palace reception, spotting her then prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, pale and slumped in a chair.

On several occasions she has been urged to retreat behind more obtrusive layers of security. Each time she has refused with something between a joke and a motto for her six decades on the throne, telling aides: "I have to be seen to be believed."

Yet for the 85-year-old monarch, pictured above with Prince Charles shortly before her coronation, belief requires distance, too. Younger generations of royals have kissed and told. But the queen has never given an interview. Though some of her 12 British prime ministers were convinced they forged a special bond during weekly audiences with their sovereign, her personal politics remain unknown.

Over the years, various aristocrats, cousins and horse-racing grandees have been more or less plausibly identified as her friends. Even among such intimates, boundaries are observed, for fear of crossing an unseen line and triggering a stare of blank, silent rebuke. "She is never—you know—not the Queen," advises an unnamed friend, quoted in the opening lines of a new biography by the BBC's senior political interviewer, Andrew Marr.

Yet as a constitutional monarch, ruling with the tacit consent of the majority, she is not the only judge of the trade-off between necessary display and indispensable discretion. The public have a say as well. Some of the queen's closest brushes with disaster have involved a lack of visibility, most painfully in 1997 when she remained in Scotland with the royal family after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. She only returned to London after pleas from her new, young prime minister, Tony Blair (and lynch-mob demands to "Show Us You Care" from the tabloids).

The double nature of the queen—an unusually private woman with extraordinary public duties—poses a test for all who try to write about her. Including Mr Marr's book, five new biographies have been prepared for 2012, the queen's diamond jubilee year. The authors boast of watching the queen at work, interviewing officials from the royal household and of trawling through archives. They quote family members, friends and people with a claim to know the queen.

In the process, all five biographers wrestle with the question neatly framed by their subject herself: if to see the queen is to believe in her, what vantage point allows the most authentic experience of faith? Which queen is the most "real", the private woman or the public figure? Each offers a different answer.

Two of the authors, Sarah Bradford and Robert Lacey, are veteran royal historians, whose 2012 biographies draw on previously published work. With the frankness of an old pro, at one point Ms Bradford names different schools of royal-watching. There is the "work of the Queen" genre, as pioneered by the 1969 television film "Royal Family", which showed the monarch working through boxes of state papers, preparing state visits or relaxing with her family. Alas, she explains, once the public had seen inside royal drawing rooms, they soon wanted to peer into the bedroom. Thus arose the "royal soap opera" genre. Ms Bradford takes readers on a brisk, assured canter through the familiar landmarks of both genres, adding a dose of history as she goes. Mr Lacey, who has been writing about the queen for nearly 40 years, advertises his slim volume as a "pleasant afternoon's reading", which it is not. At once knowledgeable and jaundiced, Mr Lacey seems slightly sick of his royal subjects, as do the unnamed courtiers and insiders whom he quotes.

Robert Hardman, a royal correspondent for the *Daily Mail*, offers a convincing tour of the British monarchy as an institution, apeing the vantage point of the fly-on-the-wall documentary. His

access produces an interview with Prince William and several lesser scoops—a rarity in the world of royal biography, in which the same anecdotes turn up in each book. But access has its limitations. The young prince is more loyal than revelatory about his grandmother, explaining that her “gravitas” awes even her family, that she offers good advice and was “so excited” by her 2011 state visit to Ireland. Some lesser sources appear to be quoted largely to thank them for their time.

Sally Bedell Smith, an American society biographer, offers her readers the illusion of knowing the queen as a friend. Ms Bedell Smith brightly describes her own brief chats with the monarch at a Washington garden party and a London reception, before sprinkling her account with minute indiscretions from other people who have met her. The elder President Bush reveals that Elizabeth II is “rather formal” but not “standoffish”. A witness describes how a puppy defecated in front of the queen during a visit to a Kentucky horse-breeder, breaking the ice. Nancy Reagan recalls a breakfast with the queen, Prince Philip and Prince Charles at Windsor Castle; she was surprised that everyone poured their own cereal from the box. It is reported that the queen likes a travel rug round her knees and used to wear a hard hat when watching stallions cover her mares (now she stands on a viewing platform, after health and safety advice). This footling stuff is only of any interest because it is about the queen. But—fatally—those same domestic details have nothing to do with why Elizabeth II, as queen, is interesting.

Mr Marr, a former political editor of the BBC and author of some shrewd books on modern Britain, sets himself a more ambitious task: to explain what the queen’s role and position tell us about her subjects. It is an admiring portrait, of an unfashionably dutiful monarch who in her weekly audiences offers prime ministers what he calls “a kind of higher therapy”—a chance to share anxieties or explanations which will never leak, with someone who has read almost every state secret of the past 60 years (and so has heard worse before). He describes the queen and her strong sense of vocation, as a monarch “God-called” to give her life to her people as a sacrifice. Only by understanding that calling, he writes, can the queen be understood.

In perhaps a claim too far, Mr Marr emphasises the comfort offered by the queen as a symbol of the continuing British state. By representing those who did not vote for the current government or did not vote at all, she strengthens democracy, he suggests. It is a clever thought, but may overstate the degree to which most Britons suffer from constitutional angst.

But a symbol she certainly is. And in modern Britain—a restless, exhibitionist place—Mr Marr’s Queen Elizabeth stands out for her discretion, and for understanding that symbols are “better off keeping mostly quiet”. There is a lesson there for her heir, the Prince of Wales, Mr Marr suggests sharply.

Mr Marr palpably likes the queen, whether for touring the country to greet and thank people mostly ignored by “London power brokers”, or for relaxing when her work is done with “a glass of something cheerful”. Yet liking is not really the point. In Mr Marr’s words, there is only a little space, though “an interesting space”, between the queen and the woman who lives her life. Her calling gives her meaning. She “is what she does”.

Mr Marr’s sober conclusion feels right. To adapt the queen’s one-liner: for all that the spectacle and unattainable glamour of royalty still fascinates (and helps sell books), for Britain’s jubilee monarch the show is a means to an end. Being seen is about being believed.

