

I've Got Mail

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

ONE OF THE PERKS OF WORKING AT A NEWS-paper is that I get to read all the letters to the editor in their pure, unadulterated form. I'm not talking about the restrained, edited sort of letters that you usually see printed in the paper, which tend to be reasonably sane, if whiny — complaints about grammar, profanity, and the profound stupidity of anyone who happens to live in a flyover state. No, I mean the letters that show up in the newspaper's mailbox scrawled on Wet-Naps and underlined in magic marker. The ones that implicate the president in schemes to abet alien abductions or that bemoan the government's inattention to the plight of the invisible. (Mind you, really, who can blame the bureaucrats for not noticing?)

I find that looking at those letters is therapeutic because it makes me feel profoundly grounded and normal by comparison. Hey, I may be a free marketer voluntarily residing in socialist Canada (some mental health professionals' definition of clinical insanity), but at least I'm not convinced that mutant spiders have taken control of the brains of every member of Congress. (Every sane person knows that no one in Congress has a brain.)

Reading such letters is also instructive in the sense that it gives a quick snapshot of what the general public is thinking. Okay, so it may not be a Polaroid of a completely representative sample of the public at large. It's more like a representative sample of those disturbed enough to find writing impassioned letters to the editor more entertaining than . . . oh, I don't know, bashing one's head against the wall while watching Tony Danza's talk show out of the corner of a battered eye. But it's still a sample, and taking a look at it on a regular basis leads to some interesting observations.

One of those observations is that disturbed letter writers almost always seem to mention the government in their screeds. This mention can take many different forms. Often it is outright paranoid, as in, "Dear Editor, I am writing to inform you and your readers that the government is monitoring our conversations through reverse walkie-talkie devices embedded in our poppy seed bagels." Other times, it's shaped as a complaint, as in, "Dear Editor, I am sorely disappointed that your paper has not taken a stronger stand against the government's eavesdropping program, which is ruining our poppy seed bagels."

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But no matter how it is referenced, the government always seems to get mentioned.

For a couple of reasons, this makes me somewhat uncomfortable as a libertarian. First, I never want to make too much light of paranoid fantasies about little black helicopters and edible wiretap devices, because they hit a little too close to home. I've never once suspected my bagel of being bugged, but I do tend to be more

suspicious of politicians and government interference than the average person. So, it seems hypocritical to come down too hard on others who are doing the same thing simply because they have taken it to an absurd degree. (Just because someone is paranoid doesn't mean the breakfast pastry stuffed with a listening device isn't out to get him.)

Second, the letters reveal a truth that drives me up the wall: Even when people have but a tenuous grip on reality, they are still sufficiently with it to demand a government handout. Yes, they may believe that carpenter ants are forming a complex network that will overthrow the evil military industrial complex. But what gets them

really steamed is that the ants aren't getting more NEA grants to make gripping documentaries about their cause.

In many ways, all of this makes sense. The form of people's paranoid delusions can say a lot about the society they live in, with the perceived persecutor almost always taking the form of whoever holds the most power in that culture. So, in religious societies, the paranoid tend to have visions of being chased by God, or high members of the church, or Reverend Al Sharpton's hair. Meanwhile, those living under military rule tend to have visions of being persecuted by a general, a gun-toting soldier, or endless reruns of "Hogan's Heroes."

It is to be expected, then, that those paranoid people who make their home in North America would cast in the role of "person out to get me" the most powerful and menacing force in their society: Donald Trump. Just kidding. Of course I mean the government. After all, it's the government that has the power and weaponry to lock people up for having a smoke. And only the government can extract large amounts of money from a television network that deigns to mix female breasts with football.

The sad lesson for libertarians, I suppose, is that we cannot hope to ever escape the central role the government plays in our lives, even if we happen to go completely and totally nuts. On the bright side, though, we can always complain about it in a letter to the editor. **R**

