

# Hot Type

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## Burying the Bomb

Homeland security failing, page 30

By Michael Miner

An AP story out of Washington on December 6, 1941, that began "If the Japanese ever launch a sneak attack against Pearl Harbor, experts say it's a sitting duck" wouldn't have been plastered across the front pages because no newspaper would have accepted the premise. A September 10, 2001, story warning of hijacked planes used as missiles would have gotten an equally cold reception.

Today it's a given that 9/11 was merely the first assault and the enemy will come again, but stories that sound an alarm still go begging. This month the 9/11 Commission did the work newspapers have refused to do and gave Washington a homeland-security report card full of Cs, Ds, and Fs. The story AP offered papers for December 6 began "Time, money and ever-present terror threats have done little to close gaping holes in the nation's security system, the former Sept. 11 Commission said Monday." The *Sun-Times* ran this story on page 30, below a piece on Tom DeLay and a story with the headline "Are we ready for movies about 9/11?"

I don't know why this performance astonished me. On August 5 I wrote a column marveling that almost four years after 9/11 American newspapers still weren't thinking seriously enough about homeland security. My exhibit A was a *Sun-Times* editorial touting the wonders of Santiago Calatrava's pro-

posed 2,000-foot Fordham Spire. Build it, said the *Sun-Times*, to show we're not "caving in to the shallow threat of terrorism." Was putting the 9/11 Commission's report on page 30 its way of showing us it still refused to cave?

The *Sun-Times* wasn't the only paper to misjudge the news. The *New York Times* put its version of the AP story on page 22 of the national edition on December 6, and plenty of other papers didn't think the story deserved page one. The *Tribune* properly topped its front page with the headline "9/11 panel: U.S. not safe," but it still fell short. The *Tribune* borrowed its story from the *Washington Post*, and there was no sidebar covering the Chicago angle—as if a report giving the government a D for cargo and luggage screening and an F for communication between first responders didn't suggest one. Papers in other cities quoted former Illinois governor Jim Thompson, a member of the panel, but on December 6 the Chicago papers didn't.

The *Salt Lake Tribune* was a model of competent journalism. Its story ran on page one (with an editorial in the same edition), and the local angle dominated. It identified Utah's Orrin

Hatch as one of a "handful of senators" standing in the way of a change in federal law that would allow homeland security funds to be distributed on the basis of risk, instead of on the basis of what commission chairman Thomas Kean called "pork barrel spending."

This change obviously matters to Chicago. The *Sun-Times* figured that out in time to publish an editorial on December 7 that was longer than its news story the day before. The editorial

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denounced the "obstinacy of Congress" and quoted Thompson wondering, "What's the rationale? What's the excuse?"

### The Unfilled Hole

The last vestige of Chicago's hallowed City News Bureau disappears at the end of the year, when the *Tribune* pulls the plug on its New City News Service.



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## The Straight Dope® by Cecil Adams

OK, before asking my question, I have to admit that I got the idea for it from an episode of *Beavis and Butt-head*. Anyways, can I hop in a box, have a friend take me to the post office, and send myself to far-off destinations? If I can, would it be cheaper than airfare? I'm sure Beavis and Butt-head aren't the first to think of this; has anyone else tried it? —Arvind Karwan, Fort Collins, Colorado

The *Tribune* says it no longer wants to pay reporters to provide content to TV and radio stations that put it online in competition with the *Tribune's* own Web site.

When I wrote about New City News's death sentence on December 9 I thought the chances were good that the hole it was leaving in Chicago journalism would be filled by City News Service of Los Angeles. I was wrong. City News Service boss Doug Faigin tells me he ran the numbers and decided the only way he could afford to set up shop here would be to increase rates by about 50 percent. He rounded up 11 potential clients—New City News has had 14, City News Service well over 100—but they balked at the price. "Their [2006] budgets are pretty locked in," he told me. "It's hard for them to come up with the money. More than one said they'd like us to contact them again in late summer."

At that point they'll be writing their next budgets, and they'll have a good idea how much they'll need the package of local hard news and future events Faigin wants to sell them. "We're leaving this door open," he said.

His business plan—which he's hanging on to—was to operate at a manageable loss for a couple of years while his operation demonstrated its competence, then start adding clients. Like maybe the *Tribune*, which he told me didn't say yes but didn't say no. And the *Sun-Times*, which said no. And the *Daily Herald*, which he didn't ask.

### Permashuffle?

Last August the *Tribune* told its critics that while things were slow the paper was going to shift a few chairs around and see what hap-

pened. First-string theater critic Michael Phillips would review movies for a couple months, second-stringer Chris Jones would handle theater by himself, and film critic Michael Wilmington would focus on Sunday essays. "I was told not to read anything into it," Wilmington told me at the time, though of course every critic affected by the job shuffle did.

Two months turned into four, and the lassitude of summer gave way to the frenzy of Christmas openings. But the new order still stands. "Arts critic" Jones covers theater. "Arts critic" Phillips covers film—with a lot of help from "staff reporter" Allison Benedikt. "Movie critic" Wilmington handles art films and writes essays.

"We're happy with the way things are playing out on all fronts," says James Warren, deputy managing editor for features. Though he still describes the arrangement as an experiment, a return to the old status quo isn't likely. Jones and Phillips seem comfortable in their new assignments, and even Wilmington, who got the short end of the stick, is in a job that suits him better: he's writing about ideas now instead of airheaded \$200 million blockbusters.

### Now That's a Team Player

Last January 14 in these pages Scott Eden told the story of prep football guru Tom Lemming and the kid he believed in, Libertyville High standout Santino Panico. Panico was so determined to reach the NFL he already had his own personal trainer, dietician, and speed coach, yet none of the major foot-

continued on page 6

I too have an admission to make: I got a little help on this answer from the Teeming Millions via the Straight Dope Message Board. But come on, it's been a long year. You guys can carry me for once.

For reasons to be shortly elucidated, not the least of which is that travel by post makes the most dimensionally challenged coach seat look like Cleopatra's barge, mailing yourself is not something that I can in good conscience advise. But yes, it's been done, occasionally in a noble cause, although more commonly in stupid ones. Herewith the facts, noble cause first:

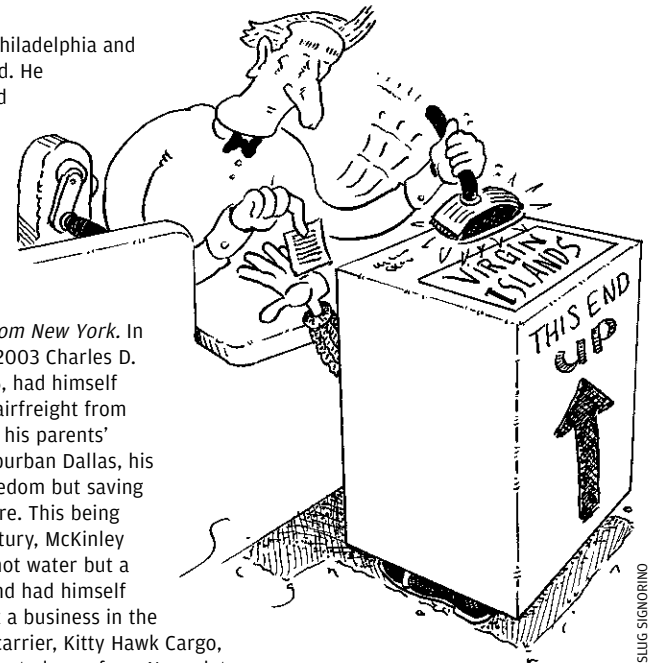
*Escape from slavery.* From the 1851 memoir that bears his name we learn of one Henry "Box" Brown, a slave residing in Richmond, Virginia, in the 1840s. Desperate for freedom, in March 1849 Brown poured acid on his finger in order to be excused from work; then, anticipating Beavis and Butt-head by nearly 150 years, he arranged for a pair of associates to nail him inside a three-by-two-and-a-half-by-two-foot wooden box, his only accommodations a bladder of water and a tool with which to bore additional airholes. That done, the accomplices delivered the goods to the railway express office, presumably paid the freight, and wired a friend in Philadelphia to await delivery of the male (Brown's joke, not mine). The journey was no walk in the shade. Despite the fact that the box was marked THIS SIDE UP WITH CARE, it was placed upside down for hours at a time (freight handlers being no more attentive to instructions then than now), causing the blood to rush dangerously to Brown's head. Just as he felt about to lose consciousness, though, a couple jamokes turned the box over, the better to sit on it. At another point the box was flung from a wagon, knocking Brown cold and nearly breaking his neck. After some additional travail the fugitive arrived at the desired

address in Philadelphia and was uncrated. He emerged and promptly fainted, bruised and battered but, thank God almighty, free at last.

*Escape from New York.* In September 2003 Charles D. McKinley, 25, had himself shipped by airfreight from New York to his parents' house in suburban Dallas, his goal not freedom but saving the plane fare. This being the 21st century, McKinley took along not water but a computer and had himself picked up at a business in the Bronx. The carrier, Kitty Hawk Cargo, flew the encrusted man from Newark to Buffalo to Fort Wayne, Indiana, to Dallas, whence he was transported by truck to his folks' house. He'd have gotten there undetected except that at the last minute he apparently removed a covering of some kind, allowing the deliveryperson to see him while unloading the box. The jig up, the driver called police, who arrested McKinley on some old warrants. A federal official conceded that U.S. air security measures clearly weren't the impenetrable shield one might like in the wake of 9/11.

*Escape from reality.* In the kids' book *Flat Stanley* by Jeff Brown (1964), a bulletin board falls on young Stanley Lambchop and nonfatally flattens him to four feet by one foot by half an inch. Pops Lambchop takes advantage of this unforeseen turn of events to mail Stanley to California for a visit. Stanley returns the same way unscathed, proving "jet planes were wonderful, and so was the Postal Service." It's fiction, OK?

*Practical considerations.* As the above



suggests, the U.S. Postal Service is not the carrier of choice for human freight, among other things having a 70-pound weight limit. Package delivery firms are more liberal about such things (weight and dimensions, I mean; nobody is knowingly going to take a living person); UPS will ship up to 150 pounds. Air cargo services generally speaking will take whatever you can fit on a pallet—more than that if you're willing to pay for it. But there's the rub. Take our friend Charles McKinley. Let's suppose he wants to try again and arranges to ship himself via UPS in a Henry Brown-size box with a loaded weight of 150 pounds (hey, he can diet). Cheapest rate from NYC to DFW: \$152—but he'll spend four days in transit. No way. Second-day air, still pretty uncomfortable: \$345. Compare that to the best deal for a conventional flight I could find on Priceline: \$126 for a one-stop via ATA, and you don't even need to provide your own box.

Comments, questions? Take it up with Cecil on the Straight Dope Message Board, [www.straightdope.com](http://www.straightdope.com), or write him at the Chicago Reader, 11 E. Illinois, Chicago 60611. Cecil's most recent compendium of knowledge, *Triumph of the Straight Dope*, is available at bookstores everywhere.

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