

THE NORWEGIANS concede that President Obama hasn't actually advanced the cause of peace, but he just might, one day

No one saw Barack in the balloon?

Wafting ever upwards on gaseous clouds of hope, only to have his numbers crash...



MARK STEYN

On the day America went Balloon Boy crazy, I chanced to be on the radio, appearing live coast to coast on *The Hugh Hewitt Show*. And, as the Balloon Boy was the hot breaking news, Hugh asked me about it. "I don't know what to say," I said, "except it's one of those peculiar and potentially tragic and instantly horrifying combination of circumstances." If I sound a bit vague, well, that's the idea. I'd gotten the gist of what was happening a couple of minutes before I went on air, but these days I'm wary: almost any "human interest" story turns out to be interesting for an entirely different set of reasons from the initial ones—the shocking "hate crime" the victim turns out to have perpetrated on himself, etc. So simply out of a sense of self-preservation, when I'm told that a six-year-old boy is sailing through the skies in a balloon, I try to suppress the urge to demand mandatory pilot's licences for kindergartners or making helium a prohibited substance.

So Hugh moved on to Afghanistan and the economy and other peripheral matters, and a couple of minutes later broke in with the news that the boy had been found safe and well. He wasn't in the balloon at all. "Thank God," I said, still wary, "but you know, there are a lot of law enforcement people, there have been a lot of people who have been sitting around at airports waiting to scramble into planes, and at the end of the day, this kid is likely to have cost authorities some significant six-figure sum."

Almost right: it was a seven-figure sum. Which is why Sheriff Jim Alderden wants to bring criminal charges against Balloon Boy's

dad, Richard Heene. I confess it did not occur to me, in that short as-it-happens interview, that a man might fake his kid's airborne adventure out of a longing to get on cable TV. I think it was Groucho Marx who said an audience will laugh at an actress playing a little old lady falling down stairs, but, if you're a professional comedian, it has to be a real little old lady. That's the way I feel: I want an America that does crazy things, not fakes crazy things.

Mr. Heene had been on a reality TV show called *Wife Swap*. Never seen it. On balance, I think I'd prefer the old-school wife swap of 1970s suburban parties where you toss your car keys in the ring and get to bonk the blowsy blond at Number 23. In this as in many other areas, reality TV seems a somewhat anemic substitute for reality. But, after two weeks on *Wife Swap*, Mr. Heene had apparently acquired a taste for the debased form of contemporary electronic celebrity.

There are usually three stages to this kind of story: first, the media herd trample over each other in the stampede to fall for the scam. Then come the recriminations, heaping abuse on the guy who suckered them. And finally the "cultural observers" weigh in with a grand thumb-sucker on the broader significance: this is a time-honoured device whereby we lads from the respectable prints can get to cover tabloid stories while still feeling lofty and above it all. Thus, Frank Rich of the *New York Times* decided to treat his readers to a dissertation of "what 'balloon boy' says about 2009." So off trots Frank Rich, marvelling at "how practised we are at suspending disbelief when watching anything

labelled news," whether it's a balloon drifting "buoyantly through the skies for hours with a six-year-old boy hidden within its contours" or "WMDs in Iraq." "The Colorado balloon may have led to the rerouting of flights and the wasteful deployment of law enforcement resources," observed Rich. "But at least it didn't lead the country into fiasco the way George W. Bush's flyboy spectacle on an aircraft carrier helped beguile most of the Beltway press and too much of the public into believing that the mission had been accomplished in Iraq."

Hmm. Instead of a big essay on "what 'balloon boy' says about 2009," Rich appears to have turned in a piece on what Balloon Boy says about 2003. Perhaps it was a typo in the editor's memo. But, at the time George W. Bush and (by the way) every senior Democrat

In the old days, to make a couple of bucks at a sideshow even a con act needed an act

were going on about WMDs in Iraq, Balloon Boy wasn't even born. So he seems a bit of a stretch as a metaphor for the early Bush years, just as Susan Boyle would be an unlikely metaphor for the Relief of Mafeking. Bush, in that useful American formulation, is history. And so, for the moment, is the Republican party. Democrats run everything—the presidency, the House, the Senate, the media, the movies, the lot. Yet, "George W. Bush" remains the only answer on the liberal Rorschach test: whatever ink blot you lay before them, it's Bush's fault.

C'mon, man. This isn't difficult. CNN and Co. cut away to Balloon Boy in the middle of a live broadcast of the current president, one Barack Obama, talking, as is his wont. So let's see: the whole of America goes bananas,

ALEX BRANDON/CP

OBAMA thought his multi-trillion-dollar ballooning debt could defy the laws of economic gravity but it just floated off over the horizon

mesmerized by a hot air balloon soaring into the stratosphere before coming down to earth and being revealed to be entirely empty. And you think it's a metaphor for the first Bush term? It's no wonder the *New York Times* is junk stock and laying off journalists faster than at any time in its history.

Any self-respecting cultural critic not trapped in the spring of '03 ought to be able to do this in his sleep: there he was, Barack the Balloon Boy, wafted ever upwards on great gaseous clouds of hope and change, only to have his approval numbers crash farther faster than any president of the last 60 years. He found the reality TV show of campaigning more congenial than the reality of governing. He thought his multi-trillion-dollar ballooning debt could defy the laws of economic gravity but it just floated off over the far horizon and was never seen again.

You want a defence of the dad? Why begrudge Richard Heene wanting wall-to-wall TV coverage without doing anything to earn it when he'd just sat through a week of media fawning over



BALLOON Boy Falcon Heene and his father

Obama's Nobel Peace Prize? The Norwegians concede the new president (in office for just 11 days before Nobel nominations closed) hasn't actually advanced the cause of peace, but he just might, one day, and in the meantime, like young Falcon Heene, he's cute and inspiring and we're all rooting for him!

Likewise, Rich goes back to the last time America knew hard times—the 1930s—when a land riven by economic collapse had sought out novelty distractions like dance marathons. But the point about dance marathons is that you actually had to do something—for hours, days on end, round and round and round, not foxtrotting or waltzing but just blearily staggering. The difference between the grueling pain of the dance marathon and the non-event of the balloon hoax is, in its way, the

difference between the Depression and the current malaise. In the thirties, Americans lost money they'd earned in the good times of the twenties. Today, by contrast, Americans are (temporarily?) finding it difficult to spend beyond their means as so many did in recent years. In the thirties, farms that had been in the family for generations and whose sons worked the hardscrabble land seven days a week were first mortgaged and then lost to the bank. Today, banks repossess "homes" in which the "owners" have no equity and whose loan terms, even in the good times, never bore any relation to any ability to repay. As with the Balloon Boy's non-flight and the Nobel Boy's non-peace, we want success on easy credit terms. Gimme the house now, gimme the TV coverage now, gimme the prize now.

There is something almost poignant about the transparency of the Heene scam. There have always been hucksters, but in the old days you actually used to require, say, a bearded lady. Maybe not all the facial hair was her own, and you filled it out

with a few stick-on bits. But, to make a couple of bucks at a carny sideshow, even a con act needed an *act*. To be able to spur law enforcement and news organizations to spend millions chasing an empty balloon across the skies is, in its way, awesome, and oddly inspiring—at least to a president who in Afghanistan, North Korea, Iran, Eastern Europe and Latin America is attempting to sell a sack of gaseous nothing as something bold and appealing.

The best tabloid stories function as an over-ripe *reductio* of the foibles of the age. So, just in time for the first anniversary of Barack Obama's election, Balloon Boy came along. The fact that the New York media sophisticates are so lacking in self-awareness they can't even see the connection makes the point as drolly as anything possibly could. M

MACLEAN'S BESTSELLERS

COMPILED BY BRIAN BETHUNE

Fiction

- 1 **TOO MUCH HAPPINESS** by Alice Munro 2 (9)
- 2 **LAST NIGHT IN TWISTED RIVER** by John Irving (1)
- 3 **THE LOST SYMBOL** by Dan Brown 1 (6)
- 4 **AND ANOTHER THING...** by Eoin Colfer (1)
- 5 **THE GOLDEN MEAN** by Annabel Lyon 3 (3)
- 6 **THE MUSEUM OF INNOCENCE** by Orhan Pamuk (1)
- 7 **THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD** by Margaret Atwood 5 (7)
- 8 **THE GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH FIRE** by Stieg Larsson 6 (14)
- 9 **HER FEARFUL SYMMETRY** by Audrey Niffenegger 9 (3)
- 10 **THE BISHOP'S MAN** by Linden MacIntyre 8 (3)

Non-fiction

- 1 **A SOLDIER FIRST** by Rick Hillier (1)
- 2 **D-DAY** by Antony Beevor 10 (3)
- 3 **THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH** by Richard Dawkins 1 (6)
- 4 **THE CASE FOR GOD** by Karen Armstrong 3 (5)
- 5 **JUST WATCH ME** by John English (1)
- 6 **WHAT THE DOG SAW** by Malcolm Gladwell (1)
- 7 **TRUE COMPASS** by Edward Kennedy 4 (7)
- 8 **OUTLIERS** by Malcolm Gladwell 5 (48)
- 9 **THE CELLO SUITES** by Eric Sibley 6 (32)
- 10 **QUEEN ELIZABETH THE QUEEN MOTHER** by William Shawcross 2 (3)

LAST WEEK (WEEKS ON LIST)

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