From Dolley to Hillary and back

By Alvin S. Felzenberg

Hillary Rodham Clinton just finished her tour of endangered historic treasures. She began at Montpelier, the Virginia estate of James Madison and his wife Dolley. Hillary Clinton cited Dolley Madison as one of her favorite predecessors — a remembrance that prompts some comparisons. Dolley Madison was also a preservationist, saving a Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington moments before British troops burned the Executive Mansion during the War of 1812. But that was not her only achievement.

If not for Dolley, James Madison might never have become president. The man he defeated, Charles Pinckney, said as much: "I might have had a better chance had I faced Mr. Madison alone." In the same way, Clinton friends credit Hillary for facilitating her husband's venture into the big leagues. She brought elements in the Democratic base his way, and order, discipline and a sense of purpose to his campaigns.

James and Dolley met in Philadelphia, when the city was the nation's capital. They seemed an unlikely pair. Madison, the Virginia aristocrat, was retiring, shy and bookish, in quite marked contrast to Dolley's spirit.

Likewise, Hillary's mother-in-law-to-be wrote of her surprise when she met the girl her son intended to marry. He had been prone to beauty queens. What was that bespectacled, aggressive intellectual doing in her kitchen?

Dolley was a Quaker widow with one child and a vivacious personality. She was smitten by the suitor she called the "great little Madison." (He stood no more than five feet tall.) They forged a great political partnership — to be matched by the Tafts, the Roosevelts and the Clintons in this century.

President Thomas Jefferson, a widower, asked his Secretary of State's wife to fill in as part-time hostess. Dolley proved a master of public relations. Jacqueline Kennedy updated Dolley's approach when she guided CBS newsman Charles Collingwood on a 1962 televised tour of the White House. Hillary Clinton's last venture into such activities was the "pink" press conference beneath Lincoln's portrait.

Dolley Madison became the most famous party giver in American history. One guest described a typical scene at one event over which Dolley reigned: "Her ... appearance was truly regal — dressed in a robe of pink satin, trimmed elaborately with ermine, a white velvet and stain turban, with nodding ostrich plumes and a crescent in front, gold chain and clasps around waist and wrists ... The towering feathers distinctly pointed out her station wherever she moved."

As she mingled among her guests, Dolley functioned as her husband's principal lobbyist and pollster. Afterward, she told Madison what people were saying about his policies and advised him whom he needed to cultivate.

Madison relied on her judgment and consulted her about policies and appointments. Unlike Bill Clinton, though, he did not delegate to his wife the major policy initiative of his administration.

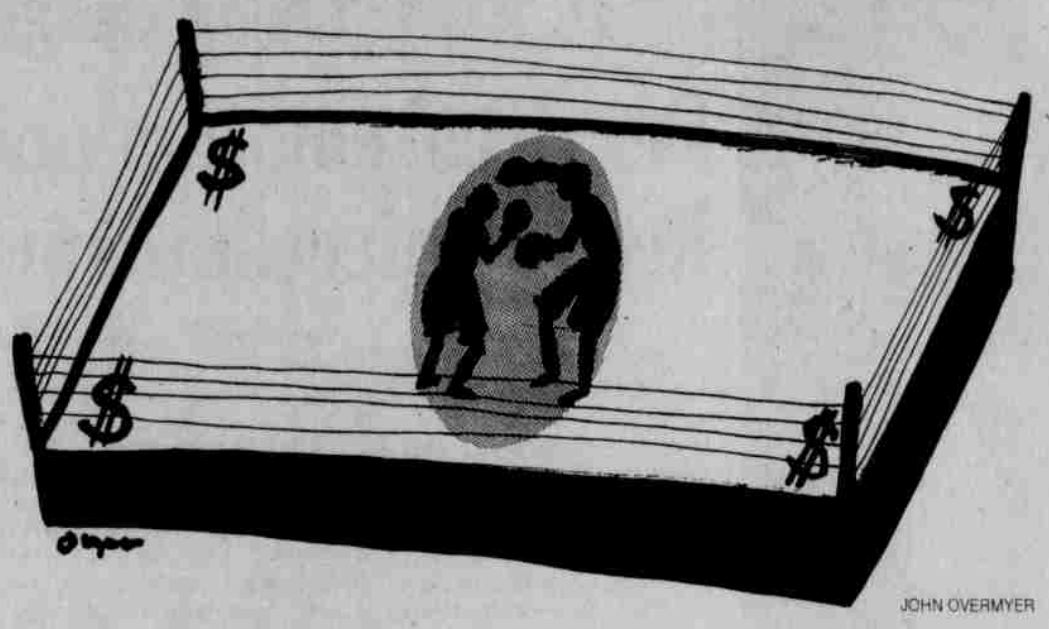
The Madisons, like the Clintons, shared intellectual pursuits and swapped stories and laughs. Not surprisingly, James Madison was an early and ardent feminist. Unlike Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison had no need to write "remember the ladies" letters to her husband. Nor did she discuss her husband's particular "hobbies" in public or rail against DeWitt Clinton, Henry Clay or other right-wing conspirators.

Dolley Madison's pet project was the Washington City Orphans Asylum. She sat on its board, had it constructed near the White House, and became one of its regulars. Like Barbara Bush, she worked to increase literacy. Hillary Clinton would have approved. But what would she make of Dolley's other pastimes, snuff and gambling?

Dolley Madison shared in the ambiguities of her time when it came to one "peculiar" institution. Her Quaker family had manumitted its slaves and left Virginia for "free" Pennsylvania when she was a young girl. Yet she married a slaveholder, but treated all within her charge as her equals.

"There is one secret," Dolley once observed, "and that is the power we all have in forming our own destinies." She shaped not only hers, but those of many others — including the couple that now occupies her former residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Alvin S. Felzenberg writes and lectures on the American presidency.



JOHN OVERMYER

Fight on, old warriors

By Carlo Rotella

Apparently, many people think it laughably strange that Larry Holmes and George Foreman, two wealthy men approaching the age of 50, will probably fight each other for money in the coming months. These people would be less dismissive of the fight if Holmes and Foreman were slimmer, faster and cuter.

But Holmes and Foreman are competent men of substance who act their age. They have slowed down and spread out a great deal, but sports fans and sportswriters who call them "old" exhibit more gall than wit. Give me two well-matched elder statesmen who know what they are doing, and you can keep Mike Tyson and other short-fused action dolls with nothing left to offer but the spectacle of self-destructive aggression. If neither Holmes nor Foreman is even half the fighter he once was, they are both still twice the fighter that most professional heavies will ever be. Neither suffers from the shortwindedness of character that bends lesser champions' careers into a truncated arc.

I, for one, look forward to the Holmes-Foreman fight. Two men rich in the currency of ring history and wisdom will be ending their era as they address the age-old fistic problem of boxer versus puncher. And they will be moving at a stately pace, so perhaps even those viewers who usually watch boxing just for the knockouts will be able to follow.

Among the great heavyweight champions, Holmes ranks as the best boxer since Jack Johnson. Holmes' career constitutes a monument to the skilled tradesman's virtues of steadiness and technique. He was never as inspired as Muhammad Ali, never a puncher of exceptional power (several rungs below Foreman, Rocky Marciano and the other bombers), never a theatrically imposing scowler like Sonny Liston or Tyson.

Rather, Holmes was, and is, *good*. He offers the heavyweight division's greatest example of pure craft — both in the sense of shrewd self-possession and in the sense of the expert worker's mastery of his trade. If it's foolish to say that Holmes in his prime would certainly have defeated Johnson or Joe Louis or Ali in theirs, it would be equally foolish to bet a lot of money on any of them to defeat Holmes.

Foreman, while not a champion of Holmes' distinction, will be remembered as one of the greatest punchers of all time. In his prime, he hit as hard as anybody ever did, and even now he still hits as hard as anybody around.

He is most famous for his defeat at the hands of Ali and for his return to the limelight as a weirdly jolly pitchman, but his legacy can be read more accurately in the craters he has left in the bodies and careers of opponents. Ask Michael Moorer (who lost a championship when the supposedly over-the-hill Foreman KO'd him) how pathetic or cuddly he found George when they fought.

Raymond Chandler once said of another Holmes, Sherlock, that "in the end he is mostly an attitude and a few dozen lines of unforgettable dialogue." Larry Holmes is mostly a craftsman's attitude and a rigorous left jab, the least glamorous and most important of punches. Foreman is mostly power and a few dozen unforgettable blows that have crushed some of the best in the business. Their fight will be about work, skill, accrued wisdom and damage, and the widely applicable drama of technique matched against force. That makes it a fight worth seeing, unlike most fights people regard as worth getting excited about these days: make-believe dustups in the movies and on talk shows, pantomime affairs between basketball players who wave at one another while making angry faces, or Tyson's next comeback.

Carlo Rotella is an assistant professor of English and American studies at Lafayette College, Easton, Pa.

'Patients' bill of rights' leaves real needs unmet

By Marie Cocco

A parade of horribles is marching through the nation's capital. Stories of patients being denied bone-marrow transplants or new livers or hearts. Word that a patient died in his sleep because an insurance company wouldn't approve the routine, timely replacement of a pacemaker battery receiver.

These testimonials are trying to convince leaders in Congress that something has gone terribly wrong with the health-care delivery system since we handed it over to the insurance industry and said the corporate bottom line would determine whether people — that is, those lucky enough to have insurance — get the health care they need.

The issue of the week is a "health care bill of rights" for patients in managed-care groups. Discussion has been reduced to a partisan conflict over whether people whose insurance plan is governed by federal law should have the right to sue when an insurance industry functionary makes a decision that causes unnecessary suffering, sickness and death.

It is a ridiculous argument. Letting the insurance industry bar the courthouse door to victims of its negligence or malfeasance is even more brazen than granting the beleaguered tobacco industry legal immunity. At least Big Tobacco was willing to make big concessions for it. Insurers and employers aren't. This debate will likely go on all summer, as if to-sue-or-not-to-sue were the single most important health issue in America. It's not.

The real issue is that we're doing this all wrong.

The United States, the world's most powerful economy and home to its brainiest economists, still hasn't figured out that health care isn't a commodity. It isn't to be bought and sold at auction, with prices supposedly determined by supply and demand. The idea that the miracle of the marketplace would cure what ailed the health-care system always was preposterous, since most consumers in this alleged marketplace have no choice at all — and when there's no choice, there's no market.

Evidence of our gross national failure is accumulating.

The roaring recovery of the 1990s has not led more employers to offer health insurance to their workers. There are now 41 million Americans without insurance — most of them working — up from 37 million when President Clinton said there was a crisis.

Premium costs have shifted toward employees, and payments are rising. As that happens, studies show, more people refuse insurance as unaffordable.

Stopgap measures are failing. The Kennedy-Kassebaum law, meant to force insurers to sell policies to people with pre-existing health conditions, was subverted by insurers who jacked up premiums as much as 600 percent and reduced the commissions of brokers who dared sell the policies. Clinton is now punishing violators of the law by barring them from selling insurance to federal employees, the largest group market.

The nation's biggest health-maintenance groups are quickly dropping out of Medicaid programs for the poor, saying costs are too high and state payment rates too low. Medicare managed care — pushed by politicians as the panacea for the federal health program for the elderly — is facing a similar mismatch. The market magicians are learning what health-care honchos told them long ago: It's expensive to insure the poor and the aged. They're sicker than the rest of us.

A debate that drowns the discussion we should be having.

There is no political will to do the right thing: propose a national health plan guaranteeing coverage to everyone; put medical decisions in the hands of doctors and patients and cost decisions in the hands of those accountable to the public.

Here we are, coming fast upon the next presidential race, and health care must again be a defining issue. As a nation, we should be ashamed that this has been so in every presidential year since Harry Truman gave 'em hell.

Every other modern nation has figured out that buying surgery isn't the same as buying soybeans. We must not enter the next century still debating that one.

Marie Cocco is a columnist for Newsday.

An older woman says hello to a newer, warmer world

By Annette Zeff

I tell some of my women friends I'm going away for a Scrabble tournament weekend. Solo.

"But what will *he* do?" they ask.

This question is one of the five indicators of an older woman's progress (or lack of it) toward independence.

I get a perfect score on item number 1. My husband, by all outward indicators, fared well in my absence. He was appropriately attired, reasonably well-fed from a wife-stocked refrigerator, and even in a pleasant mood. We both survived, and I'll probably do it again.

A willingness to learn something about the computer is item number 2. In 11 months, I've gone from sheer terror at reporting my "fatal" (a word favored by the computer) errors to my husband to being a compulsive e-mailer and computer Scrabble player. The ratings are not officially in yet, but I am semiliterate in the lingo of computers. Like a baby who proudly displays his 50-word vocabulary, I trot out my limited array of skills. Cutting, pasting and copying are still beyond me. My son's comments on my prowess (or lack of it) vary from "I'll send my men out" or "I'm surprised that you don't know that yet."

Five ways to get from yesterday to tomorrow.

Independence item number 3 is having a car phone and actually using it. I had a bag phone for a long time but was uncertain about its use. Now I carry a cute 7-ounce gadget in my pocketbook. When my car broke down two blocks from home, my first inclination was to walk back, call "help" to my husband, and then call AAA on my home phone. My second instinct was to bawl myself out for considering such dinosaurian behavior and to use the car phone to call them both.

It worked.

Were women originally programmed to believe that all equipment was inherently dangerous and unreliable? Did we learn from our mothers, as I did, that toasters, plugged in or unplugged, can electrocute people?

Item number 4: Liberated older women go to a gym and proudly carry their gym bags to show they now belong to the formerly exclusive, towel-snapping fraternity. I walk the track with my little clicker counting the laps or swim one-fourth of a mile. I haven't assayed the fitness room with its treadmill, bikes, rowing machine and all sorts of Scandinavian-sounding gear that may turn one into a less fat, more fit older woman. One of these days, when I see a particularly understanding trainer and a partially empty room with CNN on the TV, all systems may be go for Annette's entry into the world of real workouts.

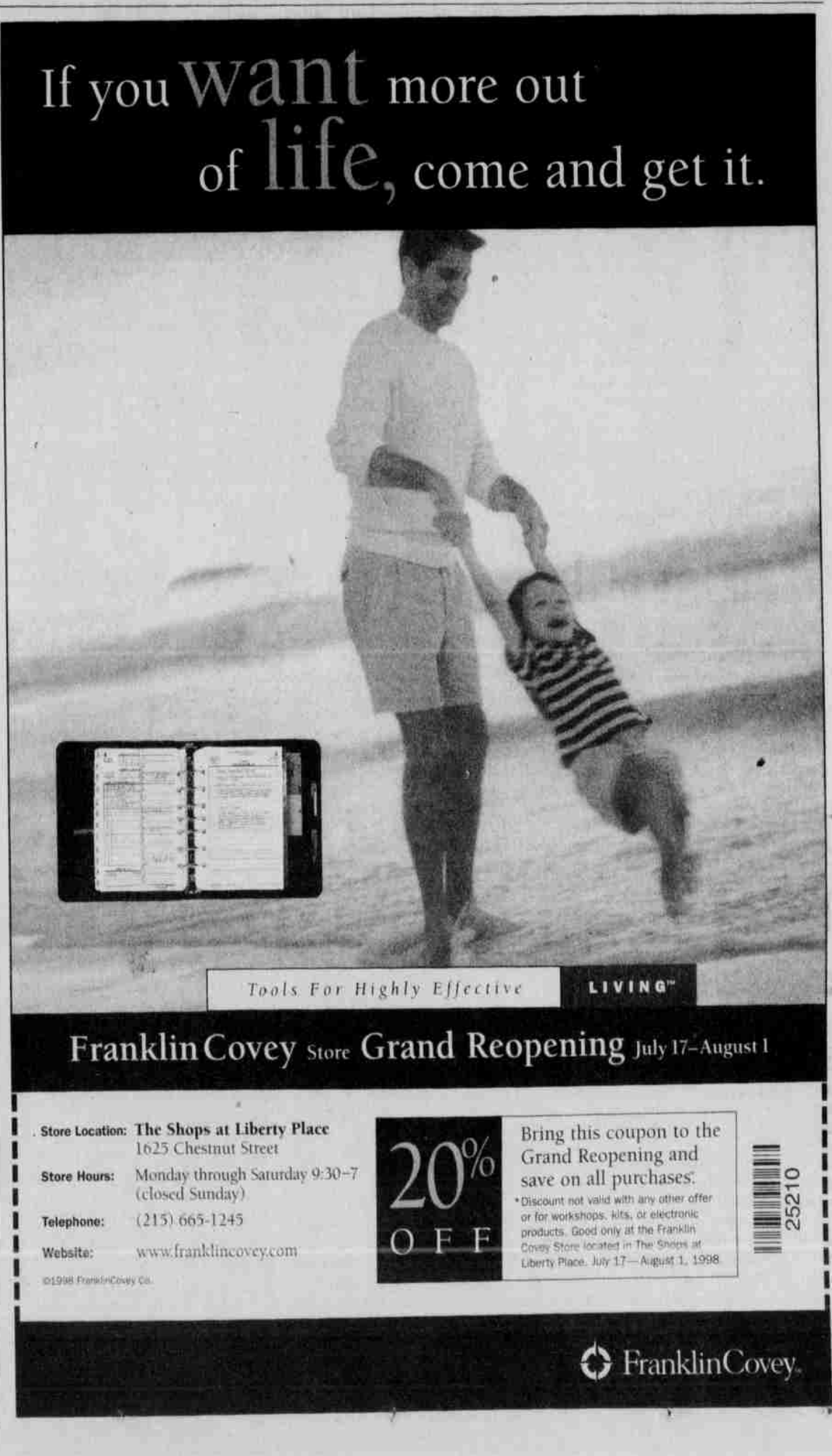
My fifth category really separates the fraidy-cats from the '90s women. Many of us say, "My husband won't let me pump gas," a favorite, shameless line to be used when you don't want to do something. I would like to hop out of the car, debonaire, insert the pump effortlessly in the right aperture, and be mistress of my fate, gaswise. But it's so much easier to drive around the neighborhood looking for a full-service gas station and then pay more. (The extra charge should be called a "dodo tax.") It's not the smell of gasoline on my clothes that I'm avoiding, but the possibility of not performing well at the gas tank, a sort of feminine performance anxiety.

Related to this item, particularly with women of a certain age, is avoidance of money access machines. We say we're afraid of being robbed. I don't know what I'm afraid of. I haven't come into withdrawing distance of one. The computer at home is a much less intimidating object than the one outside where money is involved.

On balance, my score seems just about average for women of my age with one foot still in the 19th century and the other poised to enter the 20th. Move along, woman; the millennium is coming.

Annette Zeff lives and writes in Philadelphia.

■ **Tomorrow:** Jane R. Eisner; The National Council of La Raza; Sally Steenland on infidelity.



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