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Savoir faire should be savored when it's real and even when it's not
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—My wife, Melissa, has always had a romantic interest in Sean Connery as James Bond, Agent 007. This, I think, is why she married me.

The resemblance is uncanny. We're tall, bearded, suave and in need of serious hair pieces. He left school at 13. I left long before that, but never realized it.

We both spent our young-adult years saving the world from madmen, though he succeeded and even made money at it. He placed third in a Mr. Universe contest. I never felt the need to enter.

Sean married a French woman who spoke a language he couldn't understand but who intrigued him nonetheless. I was similarly enchanted by a woman from Charlotte.

He read Proust and Ibsen in a public library. I used the East Liberty Branch of Pittsburgh's Carnegie libraries to explore the restricted-access books.

Sean and I are quick with quips, particularly about ourselves. I'd say about my writing what he said about his acting: "Perhaps I'm not a good actor, but I would be even worse at doing anything else."

We both hate the business side of Hollywood and the shallowness of our celebrity.

That which we share above all other traits is our *savoir faire*, the practice of doing the right thing, gracefully. That's why he has his Martinis shaken, which is exactly what I've always done with my cream sodas.

Savoir faire is expressed in different ways.

The Wall Street Journal (July 7-11, 2010) noted the passing of Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., last week with a column by Brian Bolduc, a Robert L. Bartley fellow at the paper this summer. The Harvard student's "Cross Country" effort was headlined, "Robert Byrd's Highways to Nowhere."

The Journal ran two photos with his column. A small photo of the departed was inset in the lower left corner of a larger photo that showed one Interstate bridge above another Interstate where a lone semi-trailer truck zipped by. On the bridge, a single file of three horse-drawn covered wagons clip-clopped in

the emergency lane.

The photo suggests that Byrd's Interstate highways in West Virginia are yet another example of wasteful federal spending, pointless because the locals have yet to acquire the wherewithal to motor into the Model-T Age.

Look. Look. See yesterday's people flummoxed by modernity. Ha. Ha.

Mr. Bolduc argues that West Virginia has fallen to the rank of America's third-poorest state despite the \$4 billion "in pork" that Byrd delivered in the last 19 years alone. He quotes approvingly three Harvard professors who believe that "...pork actually pushes private investment out of a state." Federal spending, Mr. Bolduc writes, "...raises demand for the state's workers and real estate, jacking up prices." Private employers can't compete with public employers, so they flee.

Mr. Bolduc believes that Interstate highways (pork) in West Virginia have raised demand for local labor and jacked up local prices, which have driven profit-making companies to states or places where no Interstate highways exist. Who knew?

If federal highway dollars made communities where they were spent poorer, American would be blighted with endless corridors of poverty along the 50,000 miles of Interstates built since the 1950s.

Should I believe Mr. Bolduc's vision or my own eyes?

The Interstate system has cost an estimated \$500 billion in current dollars. Interstates were typically built with 90:10, federal-to-state funding. States, or toll authorities, own, build and operate them.

West Virginia has about 555 miles of the Interstate total, about 1 percent. West Virginia's total of about \$9 billion in Interstate construction represents about 0.018 percent of the U.S. 50-year-plus total.

Today's West Virginia population is about 1.95 million, about 0.006 percent of the Nation's 310 million. Let's say that Senator Byrd brought about 240 more Interstate miles to West Virginia than its current population would merit were mileage allocated by population share.

Economic growth requires a foundation of physical and human infrastructure, which comes from private or public sources and, usually, both. Growth follows infrastructure; it rarely precedes it. It's hard to find evidence that federal highway construction has impoverished communities, which is Mr. Bolduc's position.

Mr. Bolduc cites Research Triangle Park (RTP) near Durham, N.C., during the 1950s as an example of how prosperity should be achieved, that is, through local private-sector capital funding, not government.

I wish West Virginia businesses had been as foresightful back then as those in the Raleigh-Durham area. But their inability or disinclination to invest in a local research facility can hardly be linked to federal infrastructure spending in West Virginia, of which there was next to none at the time.

It's even fair to point out that federal dollars have been one continuing pillar of RTP support since its inception, as they were for California's Silicon Valley and research clusters around Boston, Austin, Huntsville and elsewhere. Pull the federal dollars from these centers, and they would have generated far fewer economic benefits than they have.

Interstates, incidentally, serve each and every one of these research hubs. The RTP campus is nestled next to two, 40 and 540 (oink one and oink two), close to four universities (each a platter) and convenient to Raleigh-Durham International Airport (a barrel in its own right). If federal infrastructure investment is the road to poverty, why isn't the RTP surrounded by shacks and parts cars? Why doesn't the Interstate-rich RTP have the 30-to-55 percent poverty rates found in the Interstate-poor counties of Central Appalachia?

If, as Mr. Bolduc thinks, the gross number of federal dollars spent in a state is related to increasing poverty, North Carolina with more than \$69 billion in 2005 should be poorer than West Virginia with only \$16 billion, according to the latest tabulations at The Tax Foundation. Why then does North Carolina have a lower poverty rate than West Virginia by about three points, and why has this been the case for years?

U.S. Census Bureau data show the West Virginia counties that have the highest poverty rates tend to be farthest from those harmful Interstates. The same relationship tends to show up in North Carolina.

What these counties share are similar topographies—mountains that do not lend themselves to a broad basket of private business; economic disadvantages from location; and fewer higher-education institutions, among other things.

They also share a lot of two-lane highways and not a lot of Interstate.

North Carolina's mountains are economically better off than the West Virginia mountains closest to them. And the difference seems to be this: no coal in North Carolina and a 120-year history of coal production in southern West Virginia.

Mr. Bolduc argues that West Virginia has made itself poor because it imposes a high tax on business. I'm sure that West Virginia's taxes and other policies have discouraged some private investment.

But the obvious fact is that the Central Appalachian coal counties of both East Kentucky and Southwest Virginia -- both of which are low-tax states -- have, and have had for years, the same high poverty rates as the southern coalfield counties of high-tax West Virginia.

The explanation for West Virginia and Central Appalachia's chronic economic misfortune has little to do with federal dollars spent on infrastructure, state tax rates or federal payments that come through the mailbox, as Mr. Bolduc argues. Those explanations didn't make the reality that now exists.

Senator Byrd began as a conventional Dixiecrat Democrat in the 50s. He made himself into his own man through his own effort and on his own dime. He went to law school at night and turned himself into a scholar.

Life often asks us to choose from not-very-good choices. Byrd saw that many non-coal businesses would not invest in West Virginia, particularly its coal counties, regardless of state tax policies and regulations. His choice was this: Use public dollars for infrastructure in hope that private dollars would follow or do as a Senator Bolduc would have done: nothing. I'm old enough to remember some of what that nothing alternative looked like in the 1960s.

More than 30 years ago, I saw Byrd quietly rescue an Iranian-born, West Virginia college professor from the Shah's jail. The professor's views were not Byrd's, but Byrd understood that a West Virginia family needed the kind of help only he could provide. I would put Byrd's name on that little known act of *savoir faire*.

Cheap-shot caricatures are easy to draw, but they're usually not right. Connery was always a more interesting reality than Agent 007, and Byrd was far more than a poor-state pol dumping federal dollars on his constituents.

I'm still stumped, however, by the choice Connery left me. Which do I need more—an exploding brief case or an Aston Martin DB5 with an ejector seat?

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