ROGER COHEN

# Patient No. 9413

My mother was a woman hollowed out like a tree struck by lightning. I wanted to know why.

Ever since her first suicide attempt, in 1978, when I was 22, I had been trying to fill in gaps. She was gone much of the time in my early childhood, and when she returned nobody spoke about the absence.

I learned much later that she had suffered acute depression after my younger sister's birth in 1957. She was in hospitals and sanitariums being shot full of insulin — a treatment then in vogue for severe mental disorder — and electricity. The resulting spasms, seizures, convulsions and comas were supposed to jar her from her "puerperal psychosis," the term then used in England for postpartum depression.

In 1958, my mother was admitted to the Holloway Sanatorium, the sprawling Victorian Gothic fantasy of a 19th-century tycoon, Thomas Holloway, who amassed a fortune through the sale of dubious medicinal concoctions. The sanitarium, opened in 1885, was a great heap of gabled redbrick buildings, topped by a tower rising 145 feet into the damp air of Surrey.

Run initially as a private institution, the Holloway Sanatorium became a mental hospital within Britain's National Health Service after World War II. It was not closed until 1981. Many of its records and casebooks were burned. The gutted building became a setting for horror movies. Directors could not believe their luck. It is now a gated community of luxury homes.

Some records were preserved at the Surrey History Center. In the faint hope that a trace remained of my mother, I wrote to inquire. My parents had never spoken in any detail of her first depression. A letter came back a few weeks later. References to June Bernice Cohen had been located in the admissions register and in ward reports from July 1958.

These showed that "she was patient number 9413, was admitted on 25th July 1958 and discharged on 12th September 1958." The ward reports for most of August and September had vanished. I applied under Britain's Freedom of Information Act to see the records.

My re-encounter with my mother involved painstaking negotiation with an archivist. At last I was presented with the weighty register for female patients. Entries are written with fountain pen in cursive script. In columns across the page my mother is identified. "Name: June Bernice COHEN. Ref Number: 9413. Age: 29. Marital Status: Married.

**Bipolar illness and the mystery, shrouded in taboo, that preceded it.**

Religion: JEW."

I stared at her age — so young — and at the capitalized entry under religion: "JEW." The noun form has a weight the adjective, Jewish, lacks. It seems loaded with a monosyllabic distaste, which was redoubled by the strange use of the uppercase. June was not religious. She is the youngest on the page. She is also the only non-Christian.

The first ward notes on my mother read, "History of depression in varying degrees since birth of second child, now fourteen months old. Husband is engaged in medical research. Patient has some private psychotherapy and also modified insulin treatment at St. Mary's last month, being discharged July 8th. On admission she was depressed, tearful and withdrawn."

The doctor examining my mother was struck by how "her tension increased remarkably on mention of latest child." I ran my fingers over the page and paused at "JEW." I wanted to take a soothing poultice to her face.

On July 28, 1958, my mother was visited by a Dr. Storey. He "confirms diagnosis of post-puerperal depression and advises Electro-Convulsive Therapy (ECT), which patient and husband are now willing to accept."

She first underwent electroshock treatment on July 30, 1958. I see my slight young mother with metal plates on either side of her head, flattening her dark curls, her heart racing as her skull is enclosed in a high-voltage carapace. I can almost taste the material wedged in her over-salivating mouth for her to bite on as the current passes.

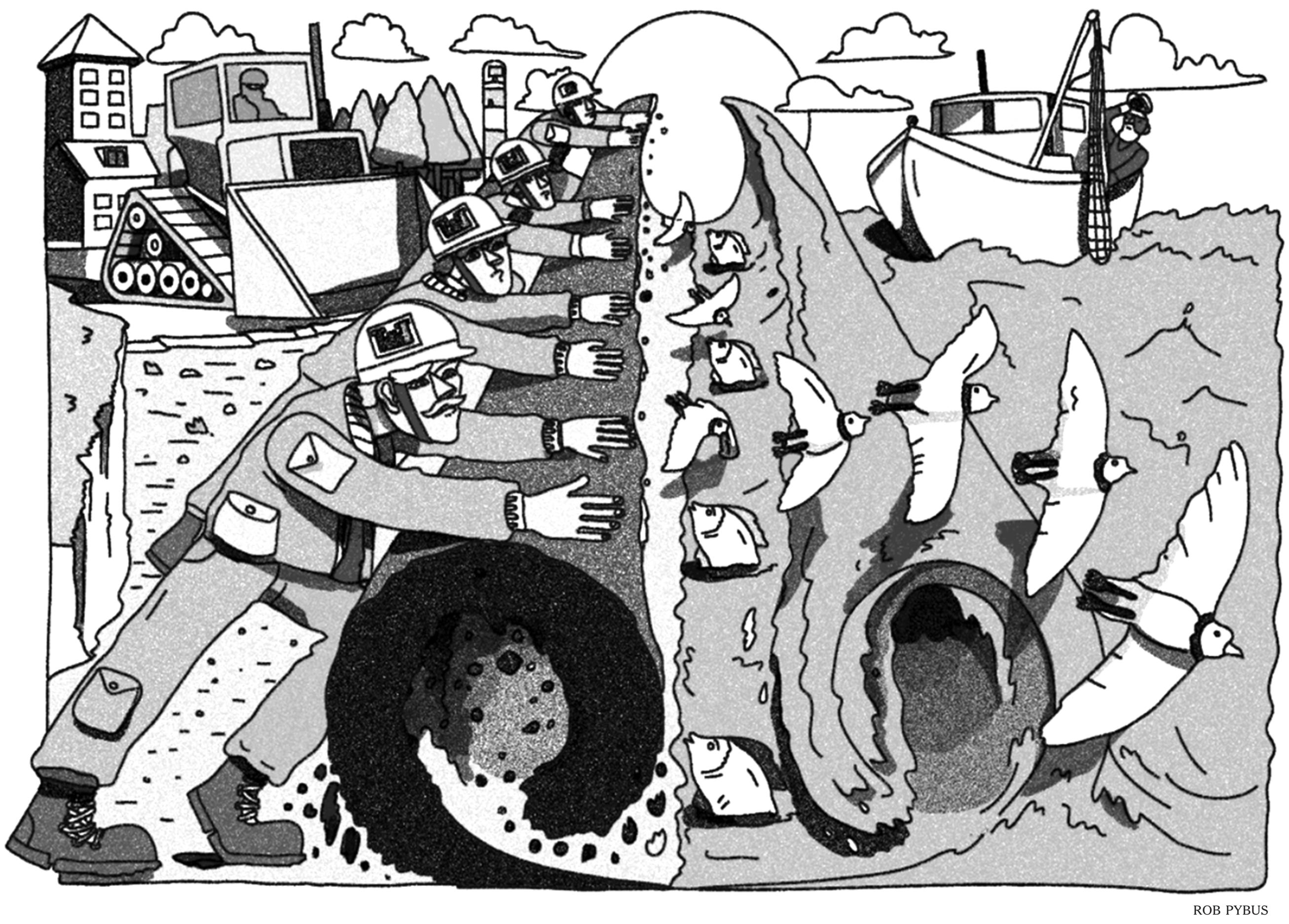
The treatment was repeated a second time, on Aug. 1, 1958. That was one day before my third birthday. So, at last, that is where she was.

I now have some facts to anchor memory, fragments to fill absence. My mother, who recovered sufficiently to be stable, if fragile, for about 15 years through my childhood and adolescence, would suffer from manic depression, or bipolar disorder, through the latter third of her life. She died in 1999 at the age of 69. The ravages of this condition I observed; the onset of her mental instability I only felt.

The hidden hurts most. Mental illness is still too clouded in taboo. It took me a long time to find where my mother disappeared to. Knowledge in itself resolves nothing, but it helps.

Acceptance — it comes down to that. This is how I came to this point, and to this place, by this looping road, from such anguish, and I am still alive and full of hope. □

*David Brooks is off today.*



ROB PYBUS

# A Beach Project Built on Sand

By Robert S. Young

EARLIER this month, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo announced a $207 million plan to dredge millions of tons of sand off the south shore of Long Island and spread it along the beaches and dunes. The Army Corps of Engineers, which will direct the federally financed project, says it will stabilize Fire Island and reduce the storm surge hazard for the mainland.

In fact, the project will do neither. It is a colossal waste of money and another consequence of the nation's failure to develop a coherent plan to address the risks from storms faced by states along the eastern seaboard and gulf coast.

That failure was underscored in a report last month by the research arm of the National Academy of Sciences, which evaluated efforts by the Army Corps and other federal agencies to reduce those risks. The take-away from the National Research Council was alarming: There is no national plan to manage the coast. No plan for storm-damage reduction. No plan for how best to allocate federal funds. And no plan for how to respond to coastal hazards and rising sea levels over the long run.

This leaves governments reactive rather than proactive. Most money is provided only after a disaster occurs, and is to be used in the areas affected by that one storm. In some cases, government officials and politicians want to be seen doing something, anything, to protect valuable coastal properties. Unfortunately, science and reality have been ignored in the plan to rebuild storm-damaged beaches and dunes along 19 miles of Long Island's South Shore, including Fire Island National Seashore.

Scientists from the United States Geological Survey have been studying the evolution of Fire Island for more than a decade. They have examined how the sediment moves, where it comes from, how the island's shoreline changes and the way ocean waters move in front of and behind the island during storms. The results of these studies have been published in numerous peer-reviewed journals.

In its evaluation of the Army Corps' draft Fire Island plan, the Geological Survey pointed out that the project's justification and benefits were seriously flawed. The project will not reduce storm surge or storm hazards for properties across from Fire Island on the mainland, even though a significant portion of the cost justification for rebuilding the beaches and dunes came from protecting

**A plan to protect Fire Island and the mainland is a waste of money.**

private property and infrastructure on the mainland. Why else would you spend so much to pump all that sand on the island?

The Army Corps' environmental assessment made a broad assumption that Fire Island had been "damaged" by Hurricane Sandy and required repair and stabilization. But significant work over the years by coastal scientists at the Geological Survey has laid out a very clear picture of the long-term evolution of the island. Fire Island is a barrier island that does not require this project to "stabilize" it. The island and the national seashore have been relatively stable since colonial times.

Significant post-storm recovery of the island's beaches has already occurred since Sandy. Natural reformation of the sand dunes will take longer, but nature is already repairing the island. Free of charge.

Fire Island is blessed with significant near-shore sand that has maintained shoreline stability over the years. This is the very sand that the Corps plans to dredge to build artificial dunes. The impacts of changing the natural flow of this sediment to the beach are unknown, but surprises are possible.

Dredge-and-fill projects like this are not environmentally benign. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service warned that the plan, in the short term, would hurt fish and wildlife and their supporting ecosystems, and would have long-term consequences on habitat and the island itself.

Of particular concern to some scientists and environmentalists is the habitat for piping plovers. These birds are listed by the Fish and Wildlife Service as threatened nationally and endangered within the State of New York. Storms like Hurricane Sandy actually create fabulous habitat for these birds in the storm deposits that sweep across Fire Island. But the proposed dune building will interrupt the development of that habitat.

Fire Island National Seashore is a perfect example of a place where storm impacts should be viewed as a natural event. Storms are an important part of barrier island sustainability. The waters that wash over the island also pile sand on top of the barrier, adding to the overall elevation of the island itself. The Corps' proposed dunes will block that process.

It is hard to understand why this project was allowed to move forward without a more detailed investigation in the form of an environmental impact statement. The Corps relied on old science or no science to build a case for the benefits. The scientific criticism provided by other agencies was overwhelming but went largely unaddressed. Instead, the Corps will bury a national seashore, a state park and a county park in sand under the illusion that some properties in low-lying areas on the mainland might gain a small bit of protection.

This is the new post-Sandy model. We now favor political expediency over science, and action over a thoughtful evaluation of its long-term consequences. □

*Robert S. Young is a professor of coastal geology and director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University.*

# Obama Cares. Look at the Numbers.

By Tali Mendelberg and Bennett L. Butler

AS the predominantly black, disproportionately poor community of Ferguson, Mo., erupted in protest after the shooting death of Michael Brown, critics excoriated President Obama for his failure to empathize. Michael Eric Dyson, for example, called the president's statement about the case on Monday a "stunning epic failure."

Mr. Obama's defenders point to his second-term commitment to issues that touch the lives of poor communities of color, especially his initiative to assist young minority men, My Brother's Keeper. But what both sides are ignoring is the president's first-term record.

A true measure of a president's priorities lies hidden in plain sight in his budget proposals. Under that standard, Mr. Obama has been more committed to communities like Ferguson than any Democratic president in the past half century.

By looking at what percentage of the budget presidents propose to spend to fight poverty, we can compare their degree of commitment.

While Mr. Obama advocated for the Affordable Care Act as a way to assist poor African-Americans, for example, we can't put that on an effort scale and compare it to President Bill Clinton's advocacy for his health care plan. Our method also avoids the problem of accounting for forces beyond presidents' control.

Using this method, we find that President Obama attempted to deliver far more than his counterparts. The Congressional Budget Office's inflation-adjusted numbers show that Mr. Obama sought to spend far more on means-tested anti-poverty programs than other first-term Democratic presidents. The targeted needs include food, housing, education, health care and cash.

Mr. Obama earmarked 17 percent of his budget for these needs, versus Mr. Clinton's 12 percent and Jimmy Carter's 8 percent. These presidents all faced economic challenges, although of different degrees and strength. Each was committed to the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged. But Mr. Obama made good on that commitment far more concretely.

No president gets all he requests, but the outcomes speak well for Mr. Obama, too. Christopher Wimer of Columbia University found, for example, that tax and transfer policies lowered the poverty rate by only 1 percentage point in 1967, under

**Has the president hidden his own war on poverty too well?**

President Lyndon B. Johnson, but by almost 13 points in 2012.

Did Mr. Obama plan to spend more simply because he had more mouths to feed? No. Even after accounting for the higher numbers of poor people caught in the Great Recession, Mr. Obama's record outshines his predecessors'. His proposed first-term spending per poor individual was $13,731 to Mr. Clinton's $8,310 and Mr. Carter's $4,431, in 2014 dollars.

Mr. Obama even exceeds Mr. Johnson, whose budget priorities amounted only to $111 per poor person. (Because Mr. Johnson was the first postwar president to tackle poverty issues with so many new programs, it is not surprising that his proposed funding levels were low at the start.) The same pattern shows up in spending per poor family. Mr. Obama allocated $67,132, Mr. Clinton $39,820, Mr. Carter $20,790, and Mr. Johnson $546, again using 2014 dollars.

Nor is Mr. Obama simply a big spender across the board. His spending on the Department of Agriculture, for example, was lower than Mr. Clinton's and Mr. Carter's, removing food stamps and adjusting for inflation.

A final test of priorities is how much a president proposes to spend compared with his immediate predecessor. By that yardstick, Mr. Obama does well too. The percent change in anti-poverty spending per poor individual is highest for Mr. Clinton relative to the first President Bush (27 percent), and lowest for Mr. Carter, who actually spent slightly less than Gerald R. Ford. Mr. Obama's increase relative to George W. Bush was a respectable 17 percent. When it comes to the poor, Mr. Obama does not appear a failure, much less an epic one.

So why does Mr. Obama elicit fiery condemnation for lacking empathy? His first four State of the Union speeches provide several telltale clues. These are a president's showcase, watched, in recent years, by up to 52 million viewers. What did Mr. Obama signal to those millions?

First, he rarely mentioned poverty. Listeners had to hunt for words like "poor" or "homeless." His average poverty word count is seven, lower than Mr. Carter's nine and Mr. Clinton's 23. Second, the little he did say was drowned in a wave of words aimed at the middle class, like "average earner." His ratio of middle-class-related words to poverty-related words was nearly 3 to 1.

When he did mention the needs of the poor, he tiptoed around them. His ratio of direct mentions of poverty to indirect mentions was 1 to 3. Contrast that with Mr. Clinton's 8-to-1 ratio. Even Mr. Carter's was higher than Mr. Obama's (1 to 2). By favoring words like "vulnerable" and "unemployed" so heavily, Mr. Obama nearly gave up the bully pulpit.

While critics are right to chastise Mr. Obama for his pallid rhetoric on race, at least as president, they are wrong to say that he does not care about poor communities of color. Mr. Obama has been spending without saying. He should get at least as much credit for the former as vilification for the latter. □

*Tali Mendelberg, a professor of politics at Princeton, is the author, with Chris Karpowitz, of "The Silent Sex: Gender, Deliberation and Institutions." Bennett L. Butler is a recent graduate of Princeton.*

PAUL KRUGMAN

# Hawks Crying Wolf

According to a recent report in The Times, there is dissent at the Fed: "An increasingly vocal minority of Federal Reserve officials want the central bank to retreat more quickly" from its easy-money policies, which they warn run the risk of causing inflation. And this debate, we are told, is likely to dominate the big economic symposium currently underway in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

That may well be the case. But there's something you should know: That "vocal minority" has been warning about soaring inflation more or less nonstop for six years. And the persistence of that obsession seems, to me, to be a more interesting and important story than the fact that the usual suspects are saying the usual things.

Before I try to explain the inflation obsession, let's talk about how striking that obsession really is.

The Times article singles out for special mention Charles Plosser of the Philadelphia Fed, who is, indeed, warning about inflation risks. But you should know that he warned about the danger of rising inflation in 2008. He warned about it in 2009. He did the same in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013. He was wrong each time, but, undaunted, he's now doing it again.

And this record isn't unusual. With very few exceptions, officials and economists who issued dire warnings about inflation years ago are still issuing more or

**Trying to understand the inflation obsession.**

less identical warnings today. Narayana Kocherlakota, president of the Minneapolis Fed, is the only prominent counterexample I can think of.

Now, everyone who has been in the economics business any length of time, myself very much included, has made some incorrect predictions. If you haven't, you're playing it too safe. The inflation hawks, however, show no sign of learning from their mistakes. Where is the soul-searching, the attempt to understand how they could have been so wrong?

The point is that when you see people clinging to a view of the world in the teeth of the evidence, failing to reconsider their beliefs despite repeated prediction failures, you have to suspect that there are ulterior motives involved. So the interesting question is: What is it about crying "Inflation!" that makes it so appealing that people keep doing it despite having been wrong again and again?

Well, when economic myths persist, the explanation usually lies in politics — and, in particular, in class interests. There is not a shred of evidence that cutting tax rates on the wealthy boosts the economy, but there's no mystery about why leading Republicans like Representative Paul Ryan keep claiming that lower taxes on the rich are the secret to growth. Claims that we face an imminent fiscal crisis, that America will turn into Greece any day now, similarly serve a useful purpose for those seeking to dismantle social programs.

At first sight, claims that easy money will cause disaster even in a depressed economy seem different, because the class interests are far less clear. Yes, low interest rates mean low long-term returns for bondholders (who are generally wealthy), but they also mean short-term capital gains for those same bondholders.

But while easy money may in principle have mixed effects on the fortunes (literally) of the wealthy, in practice demands for tighter money despite high unemployment always come from the right. Eight decades ago, Friedrich Hayek warned against any attempt to mitigate the Great Depression via "the creation of artificial demand"; three years ago, Mr. Ryan all but accused Ben Bernanke, the Fed chairman at the time, of seeking to "debase" the dollar. Inflation obsession is as closely associated with conservative politics as demands for lower taxes on capital gains.

It's less clear why. But faith in the inability of government to do anything positive is a central tenet of the conservative creed. Carving out an exception for monetary policy — "Government is always the problem, not the solution, unless we're talking about the Fed cutting interest rates to fight unemployment" — may just be too subtle a distinction to draw in an era when Republican politicians draw their economic ideas from Ayn Rand novels.

Which brings me back to the Fed, and the question of when to end easy-money policies.

Even monetary doves like Janet Yellen, the Fed chairwoman, generally acknowledge that there will come a time to take the pedal off the metal. And maybe that time isn't far off — official unemployment has fallen sharply, although wages are still going nowhere and inflation is still subdued.

But the last people you want to ask about appropriate policy are people who have been warning about inflation year after year. Not only have they been consistently wrong, they've staked out a position that, whether they know it or not, is essentially political rather than based on analysis. They should be listened to politely — good manners are always a virtue — then ignored. □