Talking points

Money well spent?

As a “free-market capitalist supply-side,” I usually hate government spending, said Larry Kudlow in National Review Online. So why do I love Washington’s “cash for clunkers” program? Because it’s one federal initiative that actually works. The program offers cash credits of up to $4,500 to car buyers who trade in old gas-guzzlers for new, fuel-efficient models, and it has been this summer’s big hit. As of last week, Americans had scrapped 250,000 clunkers in favor of new vehicles, pumping some lifeblood into the ailing auto industry and saving jobs.

That’s well worth the $1 billion spent so far—and the $2 billion Congress just added to keep the program going. As one of the buyers who traded in a clunker, said Dan Rodrick in the Baltimore Sun, I have to agree. I’d been balking at buying a new car, but thanks to “cash for clunkers,” I’ve dumped my gas-guzzling, decapit 10-year-old minivan for “an affordable compact that should hit between 30 and 35 miles a gallon.” And I’m helping the economy in the bargain. “What’s not to like?”

Plenty, said Steve Chapman in the Chicago Tribune. The buying frenzy the program has created is largely an illusion, because it’s likely that the government handouts simply encouraged people who already wanted a new car to buy now, instead of a few months from now. Some auto dealers say other would-be car buyers held out on their purchases for weeks, waiting for the clunkers program to kick in. As for environmental advantages, they will be minimal. “If you swap a gas hog for a less-thirsty model, you’ll probably drive the new vehicle more than you drove the old one—because each mile will cost you less.”

I have a different complaint, said Anna Shaff in The Washington Post. Since 1986, I’ve carefully nurtured my leaky, halky Volvo station wagon, deferring repairs while I “made do for the sake of greater priorities.” And what’s my reward? Nothing. My car isn’t on the government’s list of eligible vehicles. If I’d been more self-indulgent and bought a Hummer or a Ford Expedition on credit a few years back, I could trade it in and get a big reward from Uncle Sam. What a strange message: If you were selfish and bought a gas-guzzler, “you win the brass ring.” If, by contrast, you’ve been a model of thrift and frugality, “you draw a dunce cap.”

Opening the prison gates

“It’s the legal equivalent of a two-by-four to the head,” said the San Francisco Chronicle in an editorial. A federal court last week ordered California to reduce “its overcrowded, dangerous, unhealthy prisons” by 40,000 inmates—fully a quarter of the population now behind bars. The state, which is expected to appeal the order, has 45 days to cobbled together a plan to ease the absurd overcrowding: A system built for 95,000 inmates now crams in 150,000. Options include releasing some prisoners a few months early, relaxing parole rules, and shifting some prisoners to city and county jails. “There’s enormous risk involved,” said Eli Lehrer in National Review Online. In coming weeks, you’ll hear talk of releasing only “nonviolent” offenders, but 60 percent of career thieves, burglars, and drug dealers have committed violent crimes on their rap sheets. The bottom line: Tens of thousands of bad guys are headed back to the street, “where they will commit more crimes.”

The important thing, though, is that the bad guys aren’t inequitous, said Debra Saunders in the San Francisco Chronicle. So say the judges who ordered this release, contending that California prisons are “at 190 percent capacity.” But that’s because they define 100 percent capacity as one prisoner per cell. Is it really cruel and inhuman to put two prisoners in a bunk bed in one cell? That’s a vast oversimplification, said San Diego Union-Tribune. The state brought this crisis on itself by ignoring “years of warnings” about its 33 prisons, where some inmates sleep in triple bunk beds and are often warehoused in gyms, hallways, and other spaces never meant for human habitation. Last week, inmates at Chino prison erupted into a violent, 11-hour race riot that left 200 inmates injured—and overcrowding was undoubtedly a factor.

This is what comes of giving voters what they want without requiring them to pay for it, said Dan Walters in the Fresno, Calif., Bee. When people complained about crime, the legislature passed tough sentencing laws, including the “three-strikes-and-you’re-out” law, which mandates prison terms for a string of minor offenses. No one, of course, thought to “spend what it would take to legally house, clothe, feed, medicate, and educate what became a flood of new inmates.” That same disconnect between short-term political gain and reality has also left the state with “a calamitous water shortage,” broken schools, and congested, pothole-filled highways. Now the bill for California’s folly is coming due.

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