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**Selected  
Articles**

**Nationally  
Syndicated  
Columns**

4/1/2010

Richard Parker

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# Austin Plane Crash: When Our Fears Finally Reach the Boiling Point

February 21, 2010, 7:46AM

By RICHARD PARKER

AUSTIN, Texas -- By night, the shattered government offices are lit up by the floodlights of emergency crews and investigators. Hours after Joseph Stack, a failed software engineer and part-time musician, slammed a single engine plane into this building two bodies are pulled from the black glass and a single question emerges: Why?

It is tempting to fit Stack into a neat box: crazed lunatic, right-wing domestic terrorist, left-wing nut. Whatever he was in life he is certainly this in death: A killer. But he may epitomize something larger than himself. No, we are not all suicidal murderers. But in the midst of a crushing recession, strewn with the rubble of failed private and public institutions, we all live edgily along the same continuum of disappointment, anxiety, fear and yes, anger.

Stack's suicide note was neither illiterate nor incoherent. It angrily laid personal failure and long-standing grudges at the feet of others, yes, but accurately summed up recent American political and economic history. Big industry skillfully tapped big government for big favors. "From each, according to his ability," he wrote, mocking Marxism, "to each according to his greed."

Indeed, one could only fault Stack's history for being too kind. In fact, for the last three decades, the telecommunications, pharmaceutical, insurance, auto, airline and

banking industries all marched to Washington to receive tax breaks, de-regulation and bailouts. And this history lives.

Right now in Washington, a handful of would-be reformers in Congress argues that the financial collapse of 2008 may have been triggered in part by final de-regulation of the banking industry of 1999, namely the repeal of the Depression-era Glass-Steagall Act.

They suggest that re-imposing Glass-Steagall might be a good idea. And the industry's fighting it, tooth and nail. After all, the banks bought and paid for that repeal: investing \$300 million in lobbying. Forget, for a moment, that the banks promptly plunged the country into recession -- only to be bailed out by the very government they no longer needed.

On the day of Stack's violence everyone I interview who has read his suicide note has the same reaction: No, he should not have tried to kill anyone to make his point and so he deserved to die. And yes, the guy did have a point. And the people I interviewed -- who ran the political and economic spectrum, from small businessman to tony suburban mother surrounded by neighbors in upside-down houses -- could identify with disappointment, anxiety, fear and even anger.

Why? Simple: The grinding long-term, economic pressure that most Americans are under and the erosion of their long-held American dream of upward mobility. "The meritocratic ideal is in trouble in America.

Income inequality is growing to levels not seen since the Gilded Age, around the 1880s. But social mobility is not increasing at anything like the same pace: would-be Horatio Algiers are finding it no easier to climb from rags to riches while the children of the privileged have a greater chance of staying at the top of the social heap."

The source of this rant? The Economist magazine, the required reading of the financial class, which went on in 2005 to note that between 1979 and 2000 real income of households in the bottom fifth grew 6.4 percent while that of households in the top fifth grew 70 percent. Yet the income of the top 1 percent grew 184 percent. That top 1 percent of households held 33.4 percent of all net worth, a concentration of wealth not seen since before the Great Depression.

Fast forward to now. Nearly 35 percent of all income growth in the last 30 years has gone to the top one-tenth of the top 1 percent, according to the left-leaning Economic Policy Institute, while the bottom 90 percent has earned just 15.9 percent. The net effect is a long and persistent squeeze on the middle class.

Long before hardly anyone heard of Joe Stack, I began interviewing people from all walks of life and political perspectives. To a man and woman all professed that they are neither getting ahead nor laying the groundwork for their children to do so. One man heard me relate these views, dropped his head and simply said, "I thought it was just me." Indeed, it is not.

Nearing 11 p.m. and a friendly cop suggests a back route to view the crash site. The windows are blown to the fifth floor at least

and the lot is filling with official vehicles. The FBI has taken over the entire scene, the cop says. One in a metropolitan area of 1.6 million people has violently snapped. The rest go on living with their disappointment, anxiety, fear and yes, anger.

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January 27, 2009

## Health care reform: The High Price of Cheap Drugs

By Richard Parker

WASHINGTON \_ Ten years ago, one in 10 Americans returned home from the pharmacy with a cheaper, generic drug instead of a more expensive, brand-name pharmaceutical. Today, a generic drugs account for nearly 65 percent of all the prescriptions filled in this country each year.

But cheap drugs come with a high price, one that reflects just how ill, through a series of unintended consequences, our health-care system has become. Through 40 interviews with patients, doctors and experts around the country, hundreds of pages of complaints, research and documents we found that some generics fail many patients, perhaps millions, and often with severe consequences.

The new president and the new Congress face a mountain of troubles, but health care should not be forgotten among them. In the name of cost savings, our health-care system has run amok under the power of insurers. Health-care reform is not just a financial priority but also a human one, and as such reform should return the power to ration care to the individuals best suited to judge: doctors.

The number of pills Americans take is staggering. More than 200 million Americans are on a prescription drug of some kind. The typical American takes a dozen prescriptions. And we didn't get here overnight. Instead, we arrived through the boom of generics.

The average brand-name drug cost \$39.71 in the late 1990s and today it costs three times that. Responding to rising prices, state legislatures steadily made the dispensing of cheaper generics easier while the Food and Drug Administration sped their approval, putting 9,000 generics on the market.

An estimated 100 million Americans rely upon generics to treat everything from high blood pressure to epilepsy and mental illness. But not all of them do so by choice. Since 2000, big insurance companies have increased patients' co-pays for brand-name drugs by 70 percent. And insurers push patients to use generic drugs \_ which increase profits, according to "switch letters" we obtained for every state in the union.

In Connecticut, Connecticare raised co-pay on brand-name blood pressure medication, while in Michigan, the Health Alliance Plan simply said it would no longer pay for brand-name drugs, period, according to copies of their letters. In Ohio, CCHS Employee Health Plan offered to pay patients \$50 to switch to generic blood pressure medication, according to an internal e-mail we obtained. And so the trend has gone from Maine, literally, to Hawaii.

And no drug better exemplifies the unintended consequences for patients better than the latest generic version of the widely prescribed antidepressant Wellbutrin. More than 20 million prescriptions for it and its variants are filled each year to treat everything from depression to smoking.

Originally taken three times daily, the latest generic version, Budeprion XL 300, is taken just once daily \_ and for many with catastrophic consequences like uncontrollable crying, shaking, self-loathing and even thoughts of suicide. In North Carolina, the authors of the popular reference book "The People's Pharmacy," Joe and Terry Graedon, have compiled 300 complaints about this generic.

In 2007, Carole G., 68, of Las Cruces, N.M., noticed that her pharmacist had given her the new generic; as a mental health professional she noticed the smaller pills. She asked for her old medicine. Her pharmacist refused, explaining that her insurer would not authorize it, she said. So she tried the new generic.

"I was really anxious. I couldn't remember anything hardly," Carole said. "I felt anxiety and I felt like, 'Oh my God, what's going to happen to me?' I started having a feeling of impending doom."

Her experience is echoed across the country. In Kentucky, Amber S., 27, was automatically dispensed the generic in her bid to stop smoking. Within a few days, she recalled, "I was hearing voices and it was keeping me up all hours of the night." After a voice told her to go outside in pajamas in the middle of winter, Amber stopped taking the medicine. "I would never take the medication ever again, for any reason," she said. "If I had anything and that was the only cure, I would not take it."

But why? Why would drugs that are supposed to have the same effect seem to perform so differently for some? The answer is simple: They don't act in the same way, according to independent lab

research. And the federal government has never tested this generic on humans.

(END OPTIONAL TRIM)

In upstate New York, Dr. Todd Cooperman has performed one of the few independent analyses of this drug, made by the manufacturer Teva. In 2007, his laboratory, ConsumerLab, tested the original generic and the latest generic in dissolution tests that examined the rate at which pills released their active ingredient.

"What we found, to our dismay, was that the generic was releasing much faster, much more rapidly, than the original," Cooperman said. "And this is a particular concern because this is a once-a-day-product." The latest generic released 34 percent of its active ingredient in the first two hours, more than four times as much as its predecessor. And yet, the packaging states that it is exactly the same as the original, or bioequivalent.

"It's been very disturbing, to say the least, to find that the product is not only different, but that the FDA actually knew it was different," Cooperman said. "And they still allowed it to be sold without any type of warning about these differences."

The FDA has never published research on the failure rates of generics, and yet there is little doubt that the agency is having trouble policing the makeup of these drugs, manufactured and shipped through a global supply chain. An estimated 3,000 foreign pharmaceutical plants export drugs to the United States, and yet the FDA inspects just 15 of them a year, according to The New York Times.

"If we could count on the FDA to monitor the pharmaceutical pipeline, we would be enthusiastic supporters of generics once again," said Joe Graedon, the reference author. "There is no verification and now that so many generics are made in China and India ... we no longer trust the honor system."

And the problem is not just confined to antidepressants. In August 2008, the FDA warned Sandoz Inc., manufacturer of Metoprolol, the generic form of Toprol XL, a blood pressure medication, that its manufacturing process violated federal regulations, calling the pills "adulterated," according to a warning letter from the agency to the company.

Without question, generics have successfully treated the majority of patients who take them, saving untold lives and billions of dollars. But it is becoming clear that some of these drugs do not act like their original versions. And while they save money at the counter and on the balance sheet, they exact a human price.

A study by Kristin Richards of the University of Texas at Austin suggests that the over-prescription of generics may actually make health more expensive by sending patients back to the doctor again and again. Her next study concludes that epilepsy patients switched to a new generic are 80 percent more likely to experience serious seizures.

Until the new president and the new Congress tackle the cascade of unintended consequences that has become our health-care system, the high price of cheap drugs will just continue to climb. Americans will continue to get sicker before they get better.

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## ABOUT THE WRITERS

Richard Parker is a former Knight Ridder national correspondent who has been the visiting professional in journalism at the University of Texas at Austin; he was assisted by Amy Shekarchi, a senior majoring in journalism there.

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## Hurricane Ike's High Price

Richard Parker

HOUSTON \_ A peach-colored sun sets in the west. A pale full moon rises in the east, and powerless, the fourth-largest city in the United States descends toward darkness.

In the moments before the light fails, people find the few places with electricity, like the shopping mall at Katy. Since the stores are closed, there is nothing to buy. But there is time to kill until the food runs out, and then those lights flicker out. First, the Cajun Grill, then the Lotus Express and finally Dickey's Barbecue Pit. Parents clutch kids' hands and lead them out and into the gathering dusk.

But it is the ensuing pitch black that envelops more than 2 million people and 600 square miles that reveals something not just about Houston, but about Texas, and even America. We aren't so much addicted to oil as hooked on the tumultuous relationship where money, oil and the obsessive cycle of the boom and the bust all collide. It's a rollicking love affair and yet it seems doomed; it's just too hard, too costly, too painful.

The visible evidence is dramatic enough: the Galveston oceanfront smashed into matchsticks, the stilted homes of the Bolivar Peninsula ripped from their pilings. There's that boat wedged under the house in Bayou Vista. And in downtown Houston, Interstate 10 is gracelessly lined by crumpled gas stations, shorn billboards, smashed roof lines and shattered skyscraper windows.

But the storm's truest self lies in the enormous economic and financial cost. After all, as we joke in Austin, nobody comes to Houston for the quality of life. Houston is all about the opportunity, the money, the rush. The city is the undisputed petroleum capital of the world, home to the graceful homes of River Oaks and the big box prairie of Tomball. Now it is home to the third-most-expensive natural disaster in U.S. history (behind only Hurricanes Katrina and Andrew).

Yes, in Texas everything is big and something this big can ultimately be untenable. The cost of the storm is between \$6 billion and \$16 billion, according to federal estimates; private industry estimates say \$8 billion to \$18 billion. The irony is that just as Houston is the undisputed petroleum capital of the globe, rising sea temperatures are making gulf hurricanes more intense, according to the National Center for Atmospheric Research.

And the cost will only rise in the years to come. Houston didn't used to be so big but like the rest of the coastal United States it has swollen to expose ever larger numbers of people to ever-larger storms. The coastal population has soared by 57 percent since 1960 and jumped more than 200 percent in some places. As a result, some financial risk managers expect the claims from gulf hurricanes to rise 40 percent in the coming years.

(EDITORS: BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM)

(And yet, the lure of the boom is strong. Before curfew, Interstate 10 is as jammed with convoys of cars flying into town at 80 and 90 miles per hour, pickup beds stuffed with bottled water and generators. Until

Ike, after all, Houston had defied economic gravity even as the rest of the country slid into economic hardship. Buoyed by the price of oil, the skyline soared, property values roared and houses flipped. Even as the global oil supply began to run dry, Houston has been easy money for oil traders and day laborers alike.

There is a strong sense of denial in all this. The radio crackles with weathermen chatting about school closings and good weather for the work week, followed by pleadings for citizens to take ice and water to the first responders. Only to be followed by reminders for the city to boil its water. Except that there is no electricity with which to boil the water or pump the gas to work. And there is no electricity at work. One radio caller from Louisiana gently reminds: Recovering will not take days or weeks but, fully, years.

The caller grasps something that keeps eluding everyone else in the dark. Houston isn't just some bucolic collection of farms and fishing towns. It's a city. But can it survive in this form if it must be evacuated or closed for a month every two years? Can we continue to survive our dependence not just on foreign oil but domestic petroleum supplies that are constantly interrupted,

whether for 30 days three years ago, or 10 days this time?)

Oh, sure, the houses will be rebuilt, the city cleaned up and the power will flicker back on. After all, Houston is the great, if imperfect, ideal of Texas; and by extension, it is the great and tawdry love affair of America. And the wind and the water have laid it bare for exactly what it is.

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#### ABOUT THE WRITER

Richard Parker wrote about Hurricanes Katrina and Rita for The New Republic and McClatchy-Tribune in 2005. He is a former national correspondent for Knight Ridder Newspapers and lecturer in journalism at the University of Texas at Austin.

This essay is available to McClatchy-Tribune News Service subscribers. McClatchy-Tribune did not subsidize the writing of this column; the opinions are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of McClatchy-Tribune or its editors.