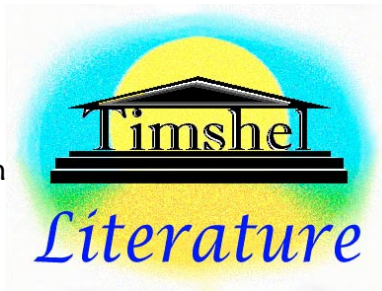


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**Just Thinking, 03/17/03:**

**Before the Order**

by Justin Katz

The snow has all melted, except in the shadows or where it had been collected in piles, and the air is no longer frigid. Still, there's a general inclination to be skeptical; the snow has been quick to replenish itself, lately, and the temperature has shifted from day to day with the succession of fronts. One hesitates to declare "Spring is here!" for fear that nature will recoil at the presumption and cast its cold blanket over the buds once again.

Nonetheless, today we've passed above the coat barrier, and a heavy sweater will do for warmth. Perhaps a jacket would be advisable to wear on walks or while venturing out to shops, but it can be of less cumbersome stuff than is necessary to hold back the winter winds. In the fall, the same temperature would produce shivers and a search for scarves and hats, just as in the waning days of an economic summer cash is kept in pockets, held in cold hands, for comfort, and we enter into the stores only for atmosphere.

Financially, we are not sufficiently confident that less troubled times will arrive with the leaves for us to feel at liberty not to hold our hopes in reserve. We look about at each other to discern whether it would be prudent to utter an oft-postponed promise of "Recovery." Is it here, or is it merely coming... still? Too many false starts forward have been presented as signs, and it may very well be that we will not admit improvement until we are again in the midst of plush revenue.

For many, improvement requires no more than new employment, or at least better employment. There is work to be found, but hiring seems of necessity rather than opportunity. Positions carry the feel of replacement rather than growth. The desk is stained, and the supplies look as if they've settled into the drawers rather than been placed there with tidy organization. Pens and paperclips must be retrieved from disorder, not shuffled out of proper place to fit the disposition of a unique personality performing new tasks. Perhaps coworkers will muster the enthusiasm to express relief that the annual raises were not frozen this year. Four percent is better than zero.

And some charitable soul may still leave his morning paper on the table in the employee kitchen, although that paper might as well be months old. The headlines are repetitious, and the stories themselves read as if faintly remembered. Even the heated opinion columns belie the fresh paper on which they are printed. *Another smoking gun. But this is not a smoking gun. We must take action. But nothing has happened as a result of our inaction thus far.*

*If you really believe that this must be done, then why are you still listening to the shrieks to stop?*

The writers, too, are in a funk. They have written all that comes to mind to write on the only topics that currently matter. Anybody who can be persuaded has been; those who have not cannot. Lesser issues hinge on events in the next few months, weeks, days, and we hesitate to take a stand that may prove superfluous before the next deadline rolls by. The economy can turn around, other Axis nations can recant, cultures can change, all based on the successful advances of troops.

And considering those troops and their families, one is humbled. With them placed in contrast for perspective, a lack of a topic on which to waste words is a trivial complaint. The deferred raise and, even, the extra month of unemployment are only soft hardships. Portfolios

and trend lines appear as mirages of something that once seemed important. The evening's recession into chilly breezes is no discomfort at all if they carry no microscopic weapons, and falling flakes are but wisps of air compared to bullets, and ice hardly an inconvenience in place of landmines.

They are the ones who hold and guard our hope. Courageous and strong in lands where arid summer never ends and sand whips the skin like sleet that never melts. The ability is theirs to put shoulder to the wheel of life and set it into motion. To turn the season toward prosperity and comfort and freedom. All awaiting the word: "Go."