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If it's not a pit bull, it'll be a cocker spaniel

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Opening shot

After a safety study found that most railway accidents involve the last car of the train, railroads started getting rid of the caboose.

An old joke. But a form of illogic still too often used. Eliminate the thing that seems to cause the problem. Consider the severe, burdensome restrictions -- basically a ban -- proposed in the City Council against pit bulls. Pit bulls often maul people because pit bulls are a popular, powerful dog that people train to be aggressive. Should they be banned, certain Chicagoans won't stop wanting mean dogs -- they will only shift to another breed that is also powerful and can be trained the same way. Lose the caboose, and the next car in line becomes the last car on the train. Rottweilers will be next, then bull terriers. Soon only pugs will be legal.

Pit bull maulings are in the news for the same reason that postal workers seem to go crazy and shoot up their offices so frequently. Not because there is anything inherently wrong with postal workers or because they go berserk more than those in other professions. But because there are so many of them and whenever a letter sorter snaps we think: *There goes another one.*

Look at it this way: You saw the story late last week about the woman who had a face transplant in France. Did you notice what happened to her old face? Chewed off by a dog. Did you notice what *breed* of dog maimed her? Probably not, because it wasn't a pit bull. It was a Labrador. Gentle, playful, good with kids. I rest my case.

Sorry, Steve

Every election season, I am required to heave a ritual sigh in the direction of Steve Rauschenberger, the Illinois state senator who many people think should hold higher office because he is so smart.

Rauschenberger -- God, that's a mouthful, let's call him "Steve" -- certainly is intelligent. I still shake my head in wonder at the 45 minutes Steve once spent explaining medical economics to me. For one glorious instant, the entire health care situation clicked into crystal focus. "Wow," I gasped, "so that's how it works . . ." And then all those damn baseball stats I learned in the 1970s came whooshing back and it was gone.

But smart people don't belong in politics. They scare the hacks and rub voters the wrong way. So sorry, Steve, wish you could be governor. Maybe next time (well, not next time either, but you get the idea).

With that out of the way, I can rain welcome on Judy Baar Topinka, who is to Steve as Ringling Bros. is to the University of Chicago.

JBT is so colorful, and I don't just mean the hair, a shade of scarlet that you normally only see on Russian cleaning ladies. Such an *interesting* personal life -- it's going to make for a memorable campaign, I just know it.

But first, I should reveal a bias. JBT has been sending me these little mash notes for years. Not that they've skewed my judgment -- I know she sends them to every reporter in the state. What is so impressive is not the positive sentiments, but the organization required to send such notes. Whenever I want to praise someone, I have to hunt for a piece of stationery, hunt for an envelope, poke around for a pen, find the right address, and by the time I'm done half the day is gone.

Where was I? Oh yes, before I start boosting Judy, I needed to know one personal detail. What's with the "Baar"? Is it part of her first name, Judy Baar, like Peggy Sue? Is it a grab at extended family status, like William Kennedy Smith? Or a political gender correctness compromise, such as Hillary Rodham Clinton?

"It's a family name," she told me. In the Czech Republic, "Baar" is the name of a well-known priest and patriot. A street in Prague, Baarova Ulice, is named after him. "My father and his brother each had one girl, so the name would die out with us," she said. "Keeping the name was the only way I could honor my father."

Topinka speaks Czech -- with a Berwyn accent -- and has passed the family name on to her son, Joseph Baar Topinka. I admire that kind of ethnic pride. Rod Blagojevich is certainly no slouch in that department, and it should be a tough match. Rod has the money, but Judy has what they call in Russian *strast* -- bigheartedness. Play ball!

Closing shot

The issue currently being chewed on by the U.S. Supreme Court -- should the law require parents be notified when their minor daughters have abortions -- is a true quandary. From the perspective of the girls, parental notification is terrifying, and would put additional strain on a young woman already in a tough position. It would increase illegal abortions, not to mention suicides, infanticides and probably murders, as not all dads are Ward Cleaver. You might argue that anyone with enough privacy and independence to conceive a child should be able to abort one with similar discretion.

From the parents' perspective, that's nonsense. I wouldn't want my 16-year-old daughter to be able to get a tattoo without my knowing, never mind an abortion -- with its risk of emotional trauma and medical complications. The teen years are difficult, and if they're using drugs, or shoplifting, or having abortions, parents want to know.

This issue is too easy to fudge -- let judges decide each case. But as I was typing the sentence about drugs and shoplifting, the answer came to me. Abortion is not illegal like shoplifting or drugs, as much as its opponents want it to be. Parents would like to know, sure, but they want to know everything, and that desire shouldn't drive social policy. Responsible parents also want to know if their children are using contraceptives, but that doesn't mean that Evanston Township High School should send a postcard home every time a teen stops by the nurse's office to grab a big handful of rubbers.

Parents should know about abortions, and will, if their kids choose to tell them. But parents should find out because that's the kind of relationship they have built over the years, the trust they have earned, not because the state rats out their daughters at the most difficult moment in their young lives.

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