Six informative statistics

(Not: This will be the first in a series of list-oriented contributions. Readers are asked to submit their own entries and rankings.)

350. This number represents the acceptable concentration of CO2 in the atmosphere (in parts per million, ppm) as reported by Dr. James Hansen, Head of NASA. He argues vociferously that if we don’t get global levels to this threshold soon, we risk an ice-free planet (which among other things would increase global sea-level by more than 200 feet). Unfortunately, the atmospheric levels of CO2 are well above this threshold and have been so for some time; current levels are ~390 ppm. While the catastrophic changes that would occur as a result of an ice-free planet aren’t likely in the next 50-100 years, Hansen and others warn that 350 ppm must be the goal for the near future. Otherwise, we might not be able to turn the process around (i.e., enough CO2 will be in the atmosphere to make large scale ice sheet melting irreversible). Hansen calls for BC except in the case of coal, as the best means to reach this goal.

2,310,984 and growing. Unbelievably, this is how many people are currently held in U.S. prisons or jails. This is more than any nation in the world. In fact, though the U.S. is home to less than 5 percent of the world’s population, its houses now contain over 25 percent of all the world’s prisoners. The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate of any countries and almost five times higher than the world’s average (Senator Jim Webb of Virginia, in Parole, 3/29/09). Worse yet, 4.7 percent of black men and 1.8 percent of Hispanic men are held in prisons or jail, compared to only 0.7 percent of white men; these numbers are even more than double when one looks only at men between the ages of 20 and 29.U.S. Department of Justice can claim to be the “land of the free” with statistics like this.

9,237. Between Russia and the United States, this is how many active nuclear warheads they have. All other countries combined have less than 900. Just when you thought it was safe to go to sleep, the threat of nuclear war between India and Pakistan has many experts on high alert, and now along comes the threat to India. Noteworthy as well, these weapons are much larger than the ones used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. But are we safer?

The U.S. and Russia have both reduced their nuclear arsenals since the 1990s but the pace is too slow for many, and nuclear proliferation seems to continue unabated. Just last year, the U.S. Congress voted to approve a nuclear technology transfer deal with India. This agreement understandably dropped the flags in Pakistan and recent U.S. bombings in Pakistan and Afghanistan (its neighbor to the West) certainly doesn’t lessen their anxiety. Moreover, what is the purpose of the Proliferation non-proliferation treaty and collapse of one of the few countries in the world that hasn’t signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which dates back to 1968? (North Korea, Israel and Pakistan are the other three non-signatories.)

1. What if I told you that there is one country in the world that refuses to sign treaties and international agreements? Person 1. Germany. Person 2. Israel. Person 3. The United States. Person 4. Afghanistan. Person 5. Somalia. The Biodiversity Convention (BC, adopted in 1992) has three goals: (1) to conserve biodiversity worldwide; (2) to sustainably use biological resources; and (3) the "fair and equitable sharing" of genetic resources (such as medicines derived from plants). Currently, 192 countries have ratified the BC, including the United States and the Holy See (aka, the Vatican). The Stockholm Convention (entered into force in 2004) now bans about 20 dangerous chemicals, including 1,345,000,000 lb. of PCB’s, and 35,000,000 kg of DDT. Of course, you’ll need a map to see where all this is going.

BEYOND THE BELTWAY
Donald Kaul

Sotomayor: a trap for Republicans

We’re about to see just how dumb the Republican Party in general, and conservatives in particular, really are. I’m pretty betting dumb.

In one of his characteristically shrill political moves, President Barack Obama last week nominated Sonia Sotomayor to replace David Souter on the U.S. Supreme Court. Judge Sotomayor, for those of you who may not be up to speed on your Appellate Court Judges, is as close to bulletproof as you can get when it comes to Supreme Court nominees. First of all, she is Hispanic and a woman, both politically good things to be, given that there have been only two women on the court before her and no Hispanics.

Second, she has a resume out of Horatio Alger. Grew up in public housing in the South Bronx. Raised by her father at the age of 9. Won a scholarship to Princeton, that toffee-nosed bastion of the Establishment. Finished at the top of her class. Went on to Yale Law School, where she was editor of the law review.

Became a federal prosecutor in New York City. Later went into private practice, then on to the federal bench, first at circuit court, then level appellate.

Academic credentials, practical experience, compelling personal narrative: she’s got it all.

And Republicans are making noises as though they’ll oppose her nomination — indeed, perhaps block it — on grounds that she is a judicial activist.

Senator Jon Kyl, a snarky Republican from Arizona said as much. Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee — what passes for leading contenders for the Republican presidential nomination these days — have been singing from the same song.

If she’s confirmed,” said Huckabee, “then we need to take the blindfold off Lady Justice.”

These are times when Huckabee seems a perfectly sensible fellow and others when it seems his jockey shorts are too tight.

For a long time now, Republicans have been riding the myth that liberals are judicial activists and Republicans never color outside the lines of the Constitution. In a word, the conservative majority on the present court is about as activist as you can get, continually ignoring precedent in order to achieve a conservative result (as it did in handling the 2000 election to George Bush, for example). Conservatives also contend that the federal court system is not tough with activist liberals who insist on making law, rather than ruling on it and that only a Republican president can stop the onslaught. More bunk. More than two thirds of the federal judiciary has been chosen by Republicans and it shows. We have very conservative judiciary.

They’re even saying that Judge Sotomayor really wouldn’t be the first Hispanic on the court, citing Benjamin Cardozo, a Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointee in 1931 and the third. Except that Cardozo came from a family of Sephardic Jews who had emigrated here from Portugal by way of England in the 18th Century. Some Hispanic. He wouldn’t have known salsa from salsa.

Personally, I kind of hope the Republicans go for it. Sotomayor’s nomination is the bitter end. In the last election, John McCain drew 31 percent of the Hispanic vote, down from the 44 percent that Bush got four years earlier. What is the GOP doing, shooting for single digits?

When Sotomayor arrived on the Princeton campus in 1972, she was one of only a handful of Hispanic students there. At that time, there were still protest meetings of the women, who had been admitted to the school only a few years before. One of the protesters was now-Judge Sam Altos, Jr., who had graduated earlier that year. That’s what this nomination fight is about, not activism versus formalism, but a tired old conservative vision of society. It is something run by an exclusive men’s club, or is it something in which a tough Puerto Rican kid from the Bronx can use her smarts to get a seat at the table?

Absent tax problems or scandal, the Republicans are on the wrong side of this in every way you can be on the wrong side of something. Which is getting to be a habit with them.

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