

SPARTACUS 2



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Introduction

The first issue of this little experiment in editorializing drew generally positive response, at Worldcon and through the mail. (I couldn't make sense out of the one critical review I saw.) So another issue seems requisite. Before I launch into bloviation, some personal catching-up is in order.

In brief, Rosy and I are selling our house in Shreveport and moving to Florida. Both of our Louisiana government jobs died, Shreveport is as dry as the desert insofar as opportunity is concerned, Rosy's mother – who lives here – is elderly and ill, so ... it is time. Here we are. The address above is that of Rosy's father, Joe Green – who's sold four stories so far this year, good for him – though as we go to press, we're ensconced at her mother's condo in West Palm Beach. Job searching begins.

And fanac continues, however crippled by fafia. In addition to this mess, I'm working on a *Challenger* I've had on the burner for most of 2013, maintaining my membership in the Southern Fandom Press Alliance – 43 years without missing a mailing! Jeezum! – and as soon as I can locate the stash of zines I packed away in Shreveport with the rest of our worldly goods, a *Zine Dump* is in order. Clearly, something about Florida weather excites the fanzine jones.

So here are some opinions on issues of the moment. I'm a little surprised at how conservative they sound. Yes, I feel hypocritical running them in a zine named for one of mankind's great rebels, since in these instances, *I back the government*. Maybe I should name the zine *Caesar* when that happens. What can I say? I like Obama. In case anyone's interested, I got into the Obamacare website and registered for the Act in 40 minutes.

I

Many questions I have about the Edward Snowden affair revolve around *control*. Who is releasing the secrets he stole from the National Security Agency? Him? Or his hosts, the Russian government? He claims, in a rather incoherent NYT interview of 10-18-13, that Russian and Chinese intelligence has had no access to his information, which makes him naïve at best, prevaricating at second-best, and downright treasonous at worst. I do not trust the guy, and I definitely do not hold with those who call him a patriotic whistleblower, or his actions admirable.

I don't applaud Snowden because I don't think the malfeasance he's uncovering is that terrible. Certainly it's a natural right of human beings to enjoy privacy in their personal business. Such was the basis of William Douglas' magnificent concurrence in *Roe v. Wade*, a statement I hold to be all but holy. But I would argue that, *absent a showing of actual harm to individuals*, intelligence gathering primes privacy in a situation of national peril. Assuming there is such a threat, I'd give the NSA broad latitude in counter-terrorism. What's the best way to fight Al Qaeda? Voracious gathering of information and analysis of facts. What's this cost? *This* is the cost: damage to our inchoate desire to be left alone.

Snowden has claimed that he has done no damage to America, since NSA's snooping – whatever it is, and I've heard little specific – does no good. I wish we could put forward our serious spooks to argue. If the black gang at NSA has foiled actual harm to Americans, I'd like to hear about it from them. But how can the NSA defend itself without exposing its methods and destroying its work? How can it point out the value in its espionage without sacrificing its effectiveness?

Our problem is that we need this issue debated in the open air. The NSA can't do it, and Snowden won't. One reason I don't trust Snowden is because he's despicable. He's a coward. He fled this country to avoid prosecution. Assuming he was truly offended by the NSA, and not merely puffing smoke, he could have chosen honorable ways of dishing his dirt. Friendly journalists and sympathetic congressmen abound. Instead he ran, taking refuge with societies that are, if not America's enemies, then our rivals. (Vladimir Putin's motive for giving Snowden asylum is obvious: he wants to embarrass the United States and reinflate his country's flattened repute. Does anyone believe he's a friend of the American people or libertarian values?)

Snowden has been compared to Daniel Ellsberg, liberator of the Pentagon Papers, which spelled out America's secret agenda in the Vietnam War. The comparison doesn't stand up. For one thing, Ellsberg dealt in history, albeit recent history; he did not reveal *ongoing* activities and no American agent or operation was placed in jeopardy. And he defended himself in public. Said Ellsberg when he surrendered to authorities, *I felt that as an American citizen, as a responsible citizen, I could no longer cooperate in concealing this information from the American public. I did this clearly at my own jeopardy and I am prepared to answer to all the consequences of this decision.*

In other words, Ellsberg had faith in the American people and our legal system. In this he was justified. The case against him was dismissed, and to this day he remains a gadfly speaking truth to power. By contrast, Snowden hides in Moscow, reachable only through an encoded internet – assuming that it's really him – and relies on Vietnam-era anti-government paranoia for his support. He demands extraordinary trust and faith from the American public, but evinces no return faith in our system, our law, or ourselves. This is no patriot. This is, at best, a cynical child playing at espionage, manipulated by his country's enemies for their own purposes.

If Snowden has a case for his actions, as many claim, let's hear it – from him. Since he demands faith, let him show faith. In an open American court, not hiding and encrypted, secreted in a hostile land. Let this accused traitor and alleged patriot stand on his hind legs and face his people.

II

If you were alive then, you remember; if you weren't, be glad you missed it.

I was 14, a freshman at Mira Loma High School in Sacramento. I'd just bought my lunch, a sectioned tomato with tuna salad. A fella from my class – Kurt Bischoff – came up to me. When he said the words, I scoffed. “Wanna bet on it?” he said. A weight of dread fell over life like a leaden blanket. I had to force myself to eat. Later, I went to the library, where they had the intercom hooked up to the radio.

When the priests came out of Parkland and told the press what they had seen, and what they knew, I flinched. People wept. Everything changed. That was Friday, November 22, 1963, fifty years ago.

I've never had any trouble with the basic conclusions of the Warren Commission, and over the last 50 years my opinion hasn't swerved. Those conclusions make sense. Lee Harvey Oswald shot John F. Kennedy on his own and without a conspiracy behind him. My opinion is not, shall we say, universally shared.

In an article I once wrote for *Challenger*, I rattled on at some length about the movie *JFK*. I lived and practiced law in New Orleans at the time, and happened to be in the Orleans Parish Courthouse during filming. ("Happened to be there" ... yeah, sure, right.) Sissy Spacek was gracious, Kevin Costner was snotty, and Oliver Stone had my old car towed out of camera range. In my piece I recalled my angry line to his grinning face – "I've met Earl Warren, and I've met you, and guess who impressed me more?" – and swore that wasn't the reason I hated the movie. And I do hate it– despite the appearance of a personal friend in a bit part as a beautiful assistant D.A.

The film's rationale is that Kennedy's murder involved a gay New Orleans businessman, corrupt Dallas cops, the CIA, a huge number of gunmen, and how "our government" was and had been lying to us about the murder and the Vietnam War, the pursuit of which was the object of the assassination. It presents its case in a fashion I can only describe as despicable. The film mixes real footage with fabrication, journalism with outright libel. It's tasteless, rubbing Kennedy's exploding head into our faces time and time again. It's dishonest, pushing false evidence and mere conjecture as fact. It's inaccurate, presenting a phony account of the trial – Jim Garrison, the wacky D.A., didn't open his mouth during the proceedings against Clay Shaw; the prosecution was handled by an assistant (whom I knew later as a very fair and likable judge), and the Vietnam War wasn't mentioned. I firmly believe that *JFK* the film is not, really, about Kennedy. In tying Kennedy's murder to Vietnam, as Costner does in his final speech (whole cloth, by the way), its true agenda is evident: *JFK* is a screed blaming "the government" for the director's personal loss of innocence.

A huge percentage of the public still buys Stone's ego trip as the definite word on the assassination. Such is star power. However, the *informed* public has come to see things more clearly. I credit books like Gerald Posner's *Case Closed*, an accessible and rational study of the assassination, and, despite the author's oppressive ego, Vincent Bugliosi's massive *Reclaiming History*. Both conclude the same thing: every bit of evidence points to Lee Harvey Oswald as the killer, and no evidence of any conspiracy – especially a government cover-up – has ever surfaced. (The excellent recent film *Parkland* stems from this conclusion, depicting souls on the periphery of the assassination, principally Abraham Zapruder, the man with the camera, and Robert Oswald, Lee's exemplary brother. Sharing both genetics and environment, one can only marvel at the different paths they took in their lives.)

But why rely on books or movies? Go see for yourself. Dealey Plaza is easy to find. Take I-30W through Dallas, turn north on I-35E, get off at the first exit, take a couple of rights. Your first impression may match mine: the site is tiny – a bandbox. Pay the \$13.50 and visit the Sixth Floor Museum. Look out of the window adjacent to Oswald's perch. From there, the conclusion is even more inescapable. JFK was a dead man the second his car turned onto Elm Street. I could have hit him with a shoe. For a former Marine with a good eye and a telescopic sight, it's a dead-on shot.

As compelling a question as the identity of the murderer or the existence of a conspiracy is the accepted culprit in the murder: an imperfection in our national character. On the very day of the assassination, Walter Cronkite could be heard blaming "a flaw in all of us." As the Rolling Stones – not American, as I needn't point out – said in "Sympathy for the Devil", "I shouted out who killed the Kennedys / when after all it was you and me." In his column of 10-10-13, George Will traced this cultural blame to liberal bias:

progressives can't stand to limit responsibility for the killing to a single wannabe malcontent. They *have* to use the tragedy to find fault with America. I agree with Will, but only to the extent that it's fatuous to blame the whole culture for Kennedy's death. The entire political spectrum in America has engaged in this insipid exercise, as if Oswald were only what he claimed to be, a patsy, and not to blame for his act.

The responsibility for Kennedy's death doesn't rest with vast political movements, but in something simpler and more universal: the needs and hopes and quirks and hurts of an individual human being. A very simple poison hatched out that day. What we saw in John Kennedy's murder was sociopathic personal frustration striking out at perceived excellence. If a hitherto-hidden cultural evil rose up on 11-22-63, it was the fact that some people are desperately unhappy with life, raveningly jealous of those who have found value, and will strike out perversely to surmount the great hole they've found at the center of existence.

I said before that the basic conclusions of the Warren Commission make sense to me. That's because they fit Oswald. 25 years of criminal defense has taught me to judge a case on the evidence, and all the evidence points to that angry, malformed punk. Those years also taught me to look to a man's character to evaluate his capacity to commit the crime. Oswald's character is true to this murder. Oswald was a paranoid who thought the world owed him attention and respect, and resented it soul-deeply when he was not paid the heed he felt he deserved. Under his gunsight came a man possessing all that he wished he had: prestige, power, and the ability to control his world. Some urge to strike a blow for Castro may have entered into his mind, but fundamentally, Lee Harvey Oswald shot Kennedy to enhance Lee Harvey Oswald.

No sinister conspiracy fired those shots on Dealey Plaza. It was the ugly spasm of a single sociopath. As almost always, the source of tragedy resided in the individual heart.

III

Here's an exercise based on an anecdote I heard during law school. Back during Jim Crow Thurgood Marshall – later appointed to the Supreme Court by LBJ, I believe – took a gripe to a Southern state legislator. Nursing schools in that state were segregated and young black women (and men) with ambitions towards that noblest of professions had no learning facility of their own. He asked the legislator for help in setting one up.

"I'll get that for you," said the legislator, who was, I should add, but probably don't have to, white, "but you've got to let me do it *my way*."

So he got up in front of the assembly and railed. He had visited a hospital the other day, he said, and seen white female nurses having to care for black male patients, give them sponge baths, change their bedpans, handle them intimately with their own hands. He said, *Let's get some Negro women trained as nurses and free our Southern womanhood from such degrading activity as having to touch black men!*

And it worked. Aspiring black nurses got their school.

So: was that legislator a craven and contemptible racist, or was he a clever benefactor? Do we judge him by the loathsome words he used, or by the admirable results he obtained?

IV

Bullying is probably the most universally decried social evil of today, thanks to endless stories of abused teenagers and recently, the Miami Dolphins. When I think of the problem I flash on an event from my Boy Scout days and a minor Warner Brothers cartoon series, Spike and Chester.

To deal with football first, the bullying issue arose when a young player quit the team, citing locker room social pressures, and a teammate who had apparently used racial slurs against him was fired – methinks as a scapegoat. One malfeasance was uncovered that I hope the NFL does forbid: forcing rookies to spend thousands treating the whole team to meals and suchlike. That’s perilously close to criminal extortion and no professional team should tolerate it.

The other complaints I question; the offensive behavior sounds like normal masculine badinage, unspeakable in civilized society but common to every male grouping since the dawn of time. Apparently the verbal roughhouse got too rough for the young man in question, and that is too bad; I hate to see a fella abandon a valuable and enjoyable talent for such reasons. His teammates should have caught on and cut it out. Whether they would have had much faith in his ability to back them up in the clutch – to take the pressures of the game – is another story. Anyway, I hope he gets on with another team.

So what’s this got to do with Spike and Chester, a big thug and an adoring sycophant? Is simple. Bullying is a socially symbiotic act. The bully is out to refresh his own self-worth by overwhelming a weaker person and impressing comrades with his ability to do so. Chester is a toady cheering on the oppressor. In my mind he’s just as reprehensible as Spike; it’s his cheers that drive him. And if I may say so, it doesn’t matter what his words are, or what the context is – *Get that wimp* or *Way to KTF* – the cowardice and the reprehensibility are the same. I’ll tell my Boy Scout story some other time.

Vox Populi

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It’s a moot point whether the original Spartacus was fighting for liberty in any abstract sense. Far more likely, he and his companions were fighting for *their own* liberty, and had no objection to depriving anyone else of theirs ... along with their property and very lives. Pirates on the Spanish Main exercises a limited sort of democracy in the 17th and 18th centuries ... but it was among themselves. Otherwise, pirates were into piracy for the loot. I suspect that it was the same, as well, with the gladiators who followed Spartacus.

I know all this smart stuff because Darrell Schweitzer taught me everything I know. (In-joke between Darrell and myself. We’re such kidders.)

Lately, everybody seems to want to talk about homosexuality. By lately, I mean almost as long as I can remember. If it’s fanzine fans talking about the subject now, then it was other people I’ve known in past decades who were talking about it then. No matter when, the buzz of *someone* discussing gay issues seems to have always been in the background. To tell the truth, I’m not too comfortable with it.

I’ve always conceded any well-reasoned argument for fair play, justice, equal rights and all that. For instance: gay marriage. I wasn’t really sure what I thought about it. There were numerous legal repercussions, such as pensions, spousal benefits, inheritance and tax benefits. As a life-long loner without a cushy job of any sort, I get squat ... I somewhat resented two grown men who, like me, were capable of looking after themselves, treating each other as dependents. But, in the long run, I decided it just wasn’t any of my business. If two guys (or gals) want to get married and it benefits them, why should *I* resent their good luck? Or their *right*, if you want to put it that way.

But I still don’t really like hearing about all this.

I can tell you why, I think. It’s what I told some guys I knew at a gay party that I once attended. The furry fandom in Toronto got very gay for a while, just as it did in furry fandom in general before there was a comeback by the straights. But, I knew the people and went to the party because it wasn’t

ostensibly held just for people to behave gay at. Unfortunately, that's more or less what it turned into. I was the only straight person there, and must have looked visibly out of place while I watched one couple after another leave the main room and disappear for a while into one of the darkened bedrooms. I think almost everyone did this, sooner or later. Eventually, the host came over to me and said he sensed my discomfort. Did I have a problem with the other people in the room being gay?

Just to be sure that I didn't give a flip answer that he wouldn't believe anyway, I actually thought about it for a minute. Of course, I was uncomfortable, I told him. I'd be a fool to deny it. However, I said that I was certain that I'd be just as uncomfortable if I had been at a party in which everyone disappeared into the back rooms for *straight sex* ... except me. Because I was the sole person there who didn't seek sex like everyone else, I was naturally in the wrong place and the wrong time.

Then the folding wooden chair I was sitting in broke and dropped me to the floor. A round of embarrassed apologies was exchanged, after which I left. Nothing like a bit of physical humour to lighten the mood, eh?

It's just my luck ... I got a sore bum and didn't even get laid.

However, the general principle is valid. I regard people's sexual activity as their personal business, and for the most part I don't want to hear about it. I seem to regard gay activism in much the same light. I don't oppose, but would rather leave the finicky details to someone else to negotiate.

I feel a squeamish factor about sexual harassment too. However, this may be used to good advantage. Instead of trying to decide whether wearing a t-shirt with sexy art on it is harassing someone – even if they ask me to take it off – let's try to imagine the issue being “black” instead. Or “fat.” Is whatever you're doing harassment if it's about “fat?” Is it a form of harassment if you continue to make fat-jokes around fat fans when they ask you to stop? It seems that it must be. Unfortunately, I'm still unsure about the t-shirt. A t-shirt making fun of fat people might be in really bad taste but is it grounds to evict someone from a room party ... or even a con? What about those sexy t-shirts? I used to sell those at cons as well as wear them. Was that ground to give me the boot if somebody walked by my table and said they didn't like them? What if they wore an Evangelical pin that offended my sensitive secular beliefs?

This is getting too heavy. I better stop before I break another chair.

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Good to get a new title from you, sorry it's been a while since I got the paper edition, but now I've got some time to whip up some comments on *Spartacus* 1.

I usually don't offer much opinion online ... there's often too many ready to eviscerate you if you dare to differ with them. The last time I used the phrase, “agree to disagree,” well, it wasn't pretty. Printed opinions will be easier to deal with, I think.

I don't recall the idea of gays coming up when I was in school, but in the '60s, they weren't a topic of conversation around the breakfast table. As a result, I wasn't taught what to think about them. Fannish friends came out to us as gay, and we tried to educate ourselves as to what they were about, and they are like anyone else. Puberty is a horrible time for many of us, when we discover ourselves and find out what turns us on. I do wonder, in this homophobic society, if young men and women say “Oh, no...” when they discover their homosexual orientation. After that, there's a lot more self-awareness and self-esteem they need, and if they have a loving family and good friends, they get it. Toronto has the largest GLBT community after San Francisco, and there's lots of them in local fandom, too. We've worked with them to bring Gaylaxicon to Toronto one year, hold some parties with them, and I remember at Torcon 3, there was a wedding that all were invited to where eight nervous young men because four happy couples, and that's what it's really all about after all, trying to make a decent life for yourself and the person you love. We all want that, no matter your orientation. Same-sex marriage has been legal in Ontario for the past ten years, and the only side-effect from this has been happy men.

In any other jurisdiction, George Zimmerman would be rotting in a heavy-security jail, but because the gun laws in Florida border on pure insanity, Trayvon Martin is dead, and George Zimmerman is free, although I bet he's really, *really* nervous.

*At the moment, he's in jail again. The witlessness and violence of his character is again obvious. And since this victim is white and non-threatening, even to the dummies who supported him before, he's in **serious** trouble this time.*

[Regarding sexual harassment, most] conventions we're talking about are populated by adults, we'd like to think. The main instance of harassment comes from Wiscon, and you and I know the person who's been found guilty by his peers. He hasn't spoken up about his behaviour at Wiscon, and I wish he would, but I am not sure anyone would listen. We also know people who would look at this report and say that's not him being harassing, that's just **** being ****. Believe me, I do not support harassing behaviour anywhere; I just wish **** could get a voice to explain his actions, and perhaps clarify what he did. (I spoke to him about 8 months ago, and he appreciated the fact I wasn't assuming he was guilty.) Right now, downtown Toronto is hosting Fan eXpo, the closest we get to SDCC, and guaranteed there's lots of young boys with raging hormones, surrounded by lots of curvy young women cosplaying in scanty costumes. The temptations are displayed right in front of them; they need to be taught how to react correctly.

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Hi Guy, I just finished reading *Spartacus* #1 during some unexpected spare time (apparently people have better things to do on Labor Day than go to the hospital. Fewer patients = fewer medical records = less work for me) and thought I'd drop you a line.

I. Thanks for sharing your evolution of thought here. Given the way that changing one's mind is so often presented as flip-flopping or inconsistency nowadays, it's refreshing to see someone admit to learning something.

*Apparently, from the criticism, one is supposed to be **born** thinking the right way – anything arrived at later is suspect.*

II. I found it interesting to read your impression of the Zimmerman trial from an attorney's point-of-view. I also think this trial really brought home (for anyone who hadn't learned the lesson from the O..J. Simpson trial) the difference between "innocent" and "not guilty."

III. I haven't seen *Above and Beyond* or *Zero Dark Thirty*, but thanks to your descriptions, they both going on my list of movies to see (which never seems to get any shorter).

IV. I think Carol Kennedy's piece on sexual harassment that you quote here is an excellent piece of writing, and I find it quite annoying that we're still having to have the "what is sexual harassment and how should it be dealt with?" conversation over 20 years after she wrote that. It doesn't seem like it should be so hard to deal with.

V. I've spent a lot of time mulling over the *Ender's Game* situation. On the one hand, I don't want to give money to Orson Scott Card knowing that he'll use it to oppose causes I support/support causes I oppose. On the other hand, I don't want to hurt the other people who were involved in making the film. On the other hand (Hey! I'm an SF fan – I can have as many hands as I want!), I really enjoyed the book and I want to see the movie. One possible solution I heard suggested – and which I'm considering using if I simultaneously have time and money available to see the movie – is to see the movie and then make a donation to a pro-gay rights group; this certainly sounds like a reasonable solution to me.

The issue for me isn't that Card holds opinions I disagree with – if I restricted myself to reading only authors I agreed with 100%, I could only read my own writing, and sometimes not even that - but that he is actively trying to influence the law to conform with those opinions. Since I wouldn't restrict

myself from reading his books if he was dead, I won't do it while he's alive. I'll just do that I can to counteract the ill (from my point-of-view) that he's doing.

Boycotting the film of Ender's Game turned out to be a meaningless gesture, since the movie was wooden and dull and failed on its own. My general sentiment against this sort of action stands. Norman Mailer and Hemingway were overtly antagonistic towards homosexuality. Do we tear their books from the shelves? boycott movies made from their works?

I hope this letter finds you well, and I look forward to your nextish.

MOVIE NOTES

We liked *Gravity* despite its ridiculous physics – the movie is an amazing technical achievement and surprisingly moving. We also enjoyed *Catching Fire*, installment #2 of *The Hunger Games*, a righteous adventure with little pretense. Rosy, a sailor, provided knowledgeable analysis of Robert Redford's sea thriller *All is Lost*; his solitary voyager obviously has more money than sense, and where are his life jacket and the boat's transponder? The film is an exciting diversion. Sticking with the nautical theme, we applauded *Captain Phillips*, which conveys a subtle political point in the best possible way: subtly.

But I'd rather talk about three films centered on the great American topic: race. *The Butler* traces black America's social struggle through the life of a White House employee. It features some intriguing presidential portraits (John Cusack's Nixon, poor; Alan Rickman's Reagan, superb) and perfect performances from Forest Whitaker and Oprah Winfrey. It's a solid, good film without hysteria, and is for that reason overshadowed by *12 Years a Slave*.

12 Years follows the true story of a Northern black musician kidnaped and sold to a Georgia plantation 20 years before the Civil War. The poor man is first sold to a relatively kind farmer, and later, to a psychopath. This brute's mistreatment of the people under his sway is horrible, in fact, too much so. The violence becomes so obscene and so endless that it ceases to be shocking, and the villain, frankly, becomes unbelievable. A man who mistreated slaves so extremely, even in the 1840s, would have been despised and ostracized in the plantation South. This is, in itself, a hypocrisy, but the movie does not address it, and there's a problem. The contrast between the two owners – played by Benedict Cumberbatch, who is in every film being made these days, and Michael Fassbender – makes us loathe the individual more than the institution. The movie's indictment of slavery is blurred.

(Aside: I'd like to see a film about Lincoln, focusing on why he became an abolitionist. His parents were apparently anti-slavery, but I believe his own moment came when, as a young man, he hitched a ride on a riverboat heading down the Mississippi to New Orleans, and he got his first look at innocents in chains.)

I found the small Sundance film *Fruitvale Station* more effective, based in contemporary times, revealing contemporary truths and tragedies. Another real story, of an inner city black guy pulled off a Bay Area Rapid Transit train one New Year's Eve for specious reasons and shot by a panic-stricken BART cop. No evil institution at fault, except misjudging people because of their race; based on life incidents audience members may have actually experienced, nothing gets between them – us – and the tragedy. *Good* film.



We had a nice Thanksgiving, thanks for asking. We look forward to the football playoffs. GEAUX SAINTS. Comet ISON apparently succumbed to the sun as it plunged into its vicinity this afternoon, a short life but a merry one. *Sigh* ... with the exception of magnificent Hale-Bopp and a possible glimpse of distant Halley, this has been a disappointing lifetime for comets. Well, enough. You have my e-mail. Paper LOCs and fanzine trades to the Merritt Island address, please. Call 318-218-2345 sometime for a cheap thrill. And may this be a Merry Christmas for you, and 2014, a great year ...