Written by **Ralph R. Reiland** on May 31, 2011

Murder, Tulips, and Taxes

Getting up and down the ladder in cramped quarters gets tougher each year, especially when the train makes quick jerks and big sways (this isn't France with smooth bullet trains — and our tracks are old and crooked, not unlike Goldman Sachs).

Near our destination and chugging through the Chicago rail yards, I noticed a story-high painting *glorifying* Osama bin Laden on the concrete wall of an overpass amid the junk and litter. It's a stylized picture, reminiscent of the old paintings of saints on church walls in Italy. To some graffiti artist in this sorrier section of town, I suppose bin Laden is viewed as a hero of the dispossessed.

On the other side of the tracks, literally, in a cab on the way to our hotel, we were greeted with tens of thousands of tulips of every color in full bloom for miles in the city's planters on Michigan Avenue.

Our hotel is the grand old Hilton Chicago, facing Lake Michigan, opened in 1927 with great fanfare. There's a two-story Conrad Suite atop the hotel — separate in style from the rest of the building. Viewed from afar, it looks like an opulent old mansion erected on the roof. It's $8,000 per night, plus tax.

The tulips on Michigan Avenue come with an annual maintenance cost of $250,000. They'll be gone in a few days, replaced with thousands of summer bloomers, and then by truckloads of mums.

"Flowers make people calm," said former Mayor Richard M. Daley, kicking off an effort in 1989 to make Chicago "the greenest city in America." The mayor probably had that backwards. Rather than tulips making people calm, I think calm people plant tulips, while the un-calm do things like crack. Either way, the mayor put the flowers where the people were already calm, rather than in the killing fields of the city.

"In 2009, Chicago recorded 458 homicides and New York 471 — when New York's population is nearly three times as large as Chicago's," reported the *Christian Science Monitor* last year.

The murders were on the sorry streets of the city where there are more prostitutes than tulips. Even so, I doubt if a "Flowers for the downtrodden" or a "Tulips for the Fuming" planting effort would have worked to reverse the city's escalating murder rate.

In any case, with 500,000 trees already planted and park space in the city expanded to 7,730 acres, the city is spending $10 million a year on new trees, flowers, and shrubbery.

With more parks than any other U.S. city, the annual budget for the 550 parks is more than $300 million, the largest parks budget in the nation — nearly a million dollars per day.

The gardens are supposed to pull people back to the city.

In the first decade, the 1990s, the population, especially among yuppies, grew 4 percent, the first

decade of growth in 50 years.

New census data, however, show the city's population down by 6.9 percent since 2000. What's sure not to reverse things is the latest hike in the state's corporate income tax rate, a 49 percent jump from 7.3 percent to 10.9 percent.

That gives Illinois, according to the Tax Foundation, "the highest state corporate income tax rate in America and the highest combined national-local corporate income tax in the industrialized world."

That sounds like a perfect plan to drive away business, jobs and population — and the money for new tulips.

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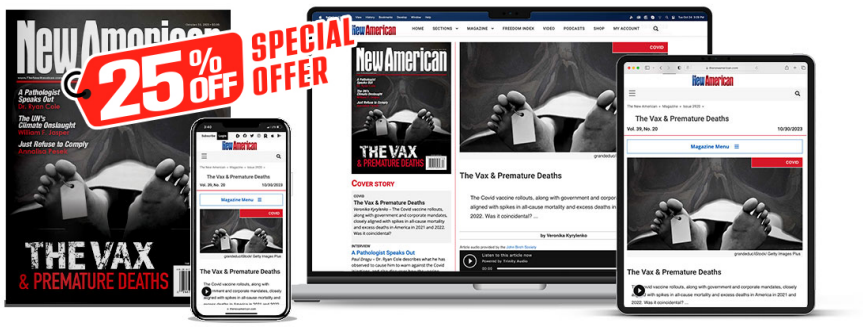

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