

That, as they say, is exactly how the bubble burst

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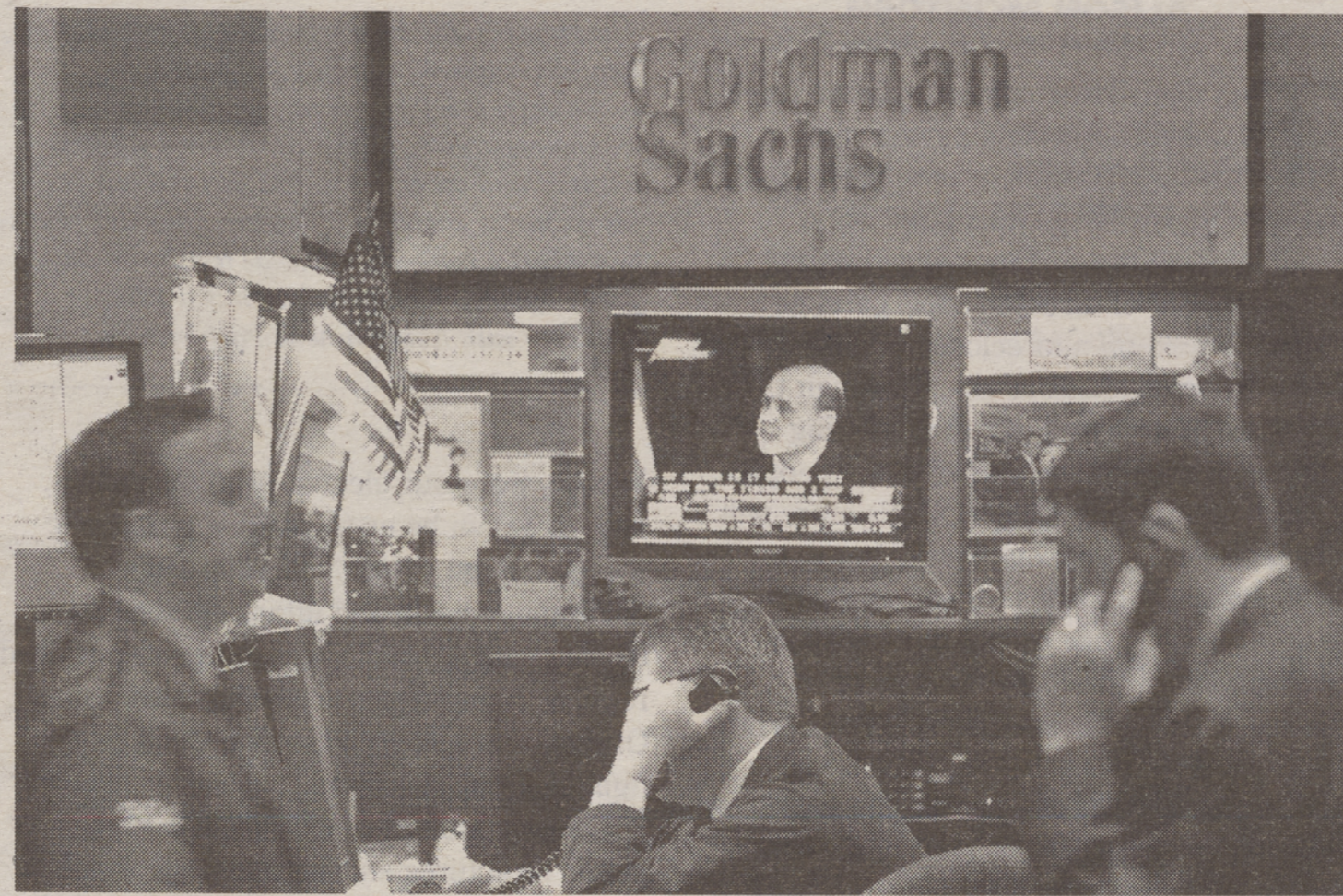
There are lots of reasons to like Matt Taibbi. His writing is witty and entertaining, his points skewer their target with the uncanny precision of Robin Hood's arrows, and despite his somewhat lofty perch as a contributing editor for Rolling Stone Magazine, he retains a truly remarkable level of humility. But the main reason I find Taibbi's writing appealing is because he is so successful at making complicated things understandable. "Griftopia" is a perfect example.

Griftopia: A Story of Bankers, Politicians, and the Most Audacious Power Grab in American History By Matt Taibbi, Spiegel & Grau, Paperback, 2011, 299 pages, \$16

saying that even though many modern political movements like the Tea Party "reflect a widespread longing for simpler times and solutions," ultimately, power will go not to those who desire simplicity, but rather to those who become adept at dealing with the world's increasing complexity.

At its most basic, "Griftopia" is a series of seven essays on modern economics and politics. On one level it is straight analysis, interlaced with a wicked sense of humor. On another level, however, the book seethes with barely restrained anger over the

"Our world isn't about ideology anymore. It's about complexity. We live in a complex bureaucratic state with complex laws and complex business practices, and the few organizations with the corporate willpower to master these complexities will inevitably own the political power." In other words, Taibbi is



Reuters/Lucas Jackson
Traders for Goldman Sachs work as chairman of the Federal Reserve, Ben Bernanke, makes an address on a television screen as they work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange.

dishonesty, extortion and outright fraud the author feels has been perpetrated against the American people by modern corporations: "The new America ... is fast becoming a vast ghetto in which all of us, conservatives and progressives, are being bled dry by a relatively tiny oligarchy of extremely clever financial criminals and their castrato henchmen in government, whose main job is to be good actors on TV and put on a good show."

Unlike many modern pundits and analysts who temper their writing in an effort to appear "fair and balanced," Taibbi makes absolutely no attempt to deny his biases or pull his punches. At times his prose displays all the subtlety of a hockey enforcer, complete with bare knuckles and a bloody jersey. (The chapter on Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan is titled simply "The Biggest Asshole in the Universe.") Though the language in "Griftopia" at times borders on crude, underneath it all, Taibbi's economic analyses are always well reasoned and thoughtful. For example, on the role

Greenspan played in our modern economic woes, Taibbi concludes: "Greenspan was the crucial enabler of the bad ideas and greed of others. He blew up one bubble and then, when the first one burst, he printed money to inflate the next one. That was the difference between the tech and the housing bubbles. In the tech bubble, America lost its own savings. In the housing bubble, we borrowed the shirts we ended up losing, leaving us in a hole twice as deep."

"Griftopia" is not an exhaustive treatise on modern economics. Rather the book is an attempt to shine a light on several recent economic and political debacles. In this it succeeds brilliantly. The titles of the sections say it all: "The Great American Mortgage Scam," "The Commodities Bubble," and my personal favorite on Obama's health care plan: "The Trillion Dollar Band-Aid."

Perhaps the most notable passages in the book are those that try to give readers some way to comprehend the almost incomprehensible scale of the theft that has

taken place right under their noses. For example, when considering the massive size of the recent bank bailouts, Taibbi writes, "With the \$13-plus trillion we are estimated to ultimately spend on the bailouts, we could not only have bought and paid off every single sub-prime mortgage in the country (that would have cost \$1.4 trillion), we could have paid off every remaining mortgage of any kind in the country — and still have had enough money left over to buy a new house for every American who does not already have one."

As with the other topics covered in the book, with the bank bailouts the author isn't content to merely note that the emperor has no clothes. He also wants to identify and point the finger at the thief who stole them. "(T)he history of Goldman (Sachs) is the story of the great lie at the center of our political and economic life. Goldman is not a company of geniuses; it's a company of criminals. And far from being the best fruit of a democratic, capitalist society, it's the apotheosis of the Grifter Era, a parasitic enterprise that has attached itself to the American government and taxpayer and shamelessly engorged itself on us all."

"Griftopia" is a brilliant commentary on the modern world. If you want a better understanding of recent economic and political happenings, this book is a great place to jump into the pool.

Fair warning, however: After reading the book, it is next to impossible to remain ambivalent about its topic. Like Thomas Paine's "Common Sense," Taibbi has produced a clarion call, one seemingly designed to wake people up and stir them to action. Regardless of which side of the political fence you sit on; whether you are a billionaire or a member of the 99 percent; whether you work on Wall Street or are occupying Wall Street, if you are not at least a little pissed off after reading "Griftopia," there is something definitely wrong with you.

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