

Sunday OPINION

DANA MILBANK

When will the Great Nibbler show bite?

Labor boss Richard Trumka is not one to nibble around the edges. He declined a plate of bacon and eggs when sitting down to breakfast with a group of reporters last week because, the AFL-CIO president explained, he was concerned he might spit out a mouthful if he didn't like a question. The stains on his Brooks Brothers necktie suggested this was more than a theoretical possibility.

So perhaps it should not have been a surprise that Trumka has lost patience with the Great Nibbler in our civic life, President Obama. The president, he complained, has been doing "little nibbly things around the edge that aren't going to make a difference and aren't going to solve the problem" with the economy. Obama, he protested, decided to "work with the Tea Party to offer cuts to middle-class programs like Social Security." And, Trumka accused, Obama has limited his proposals to "those little things that they think others will immediately accept."

Without bolder action on the economy, Trumka told the gathering, organized by the Christian Science Monitor, "I think he doesn't become a leader anymore, and he's being a follower."

This is harsh criticism of a Democratic president from a natural ally — and it's backed up by labor's plans to create its own "super PAC" rather than give money to the Democrats. The criticism is justified, as the former miner outlined it, because Obama is on his way to a failed presidency if he doesn't change course with the rollout of his new jobs program next month.

"I said to him, 'Do not look at what is possible — look at what is necessary,'" Trumka said, recounting a recent White House meeting at which he urged the president to offer more than modest programs that Republicans support. "If you only propose what you think they'll accept, they control the agenda," Trumka said. "I urged him to propose what was necessary to solve the problem... and if he doesn't and he falls into the nibbling around the edge, I think history will judge him, and I think working people will judge him."

As a practical matter, the sort of actions labor favors — \$4 trillion in infrastructure spending, a WPA-type jobs program and the like — aren't going to happen. As a matter of economics, they may not be efficient or desirable ways to fix the economy.

But Trumka still makes a good point, for reasons beyond economics or practicality — because this isn't primarily about enacting new policy. It's about building confidence in Obama's leadership as the economy flails.

If Obama is to dispel the growing — and debilitating — impression that he is a weak leader, he needs to show people he's willing to fight for something other than his tee time. "We're going in the wrong direction," Trumka said. "There has to be some hope that we're going to turn it around. That means there have to be some bold solutions and some risk taking."

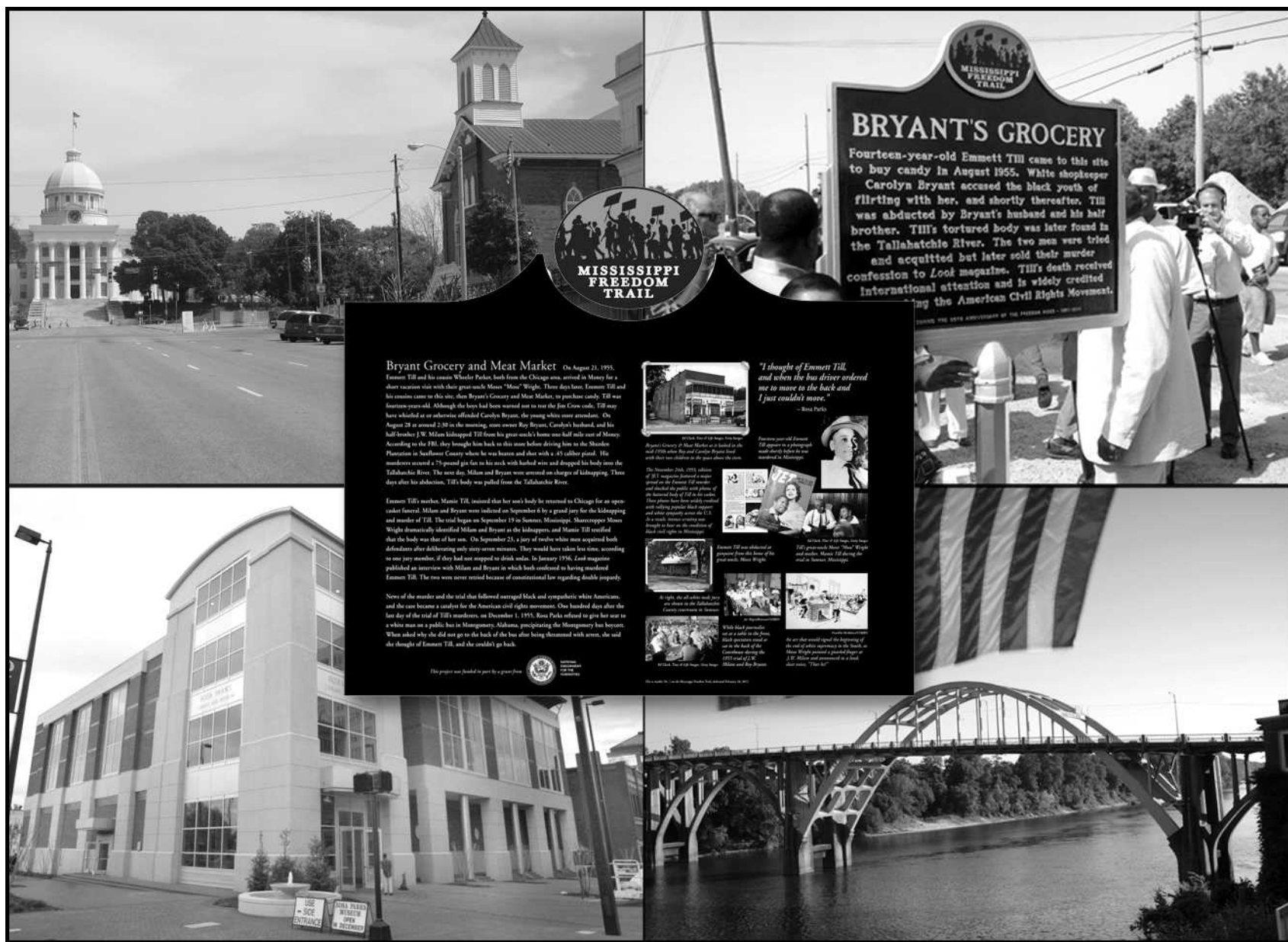
According to a poll released Thursday by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center, the proportion of Americans who regard Obama as a strong leader has dropped to 49 percent from 58 percent three months ago, and the percentage who believes Obama can get things done has dropped to 44 from 55. A majority of independents now regard Obama as unable to get things done, and a majority of Democrats think he should be tougher against the Republicans.

The president, however, remains unconcerned. Would he call Congress back from recess to address the jobs crisis? He would not. Neither would he cancel his vacation on a \$50,000-per-week Martha's Vineyard compound. When the earthquake struck the East Coast, he was on the golf course. On the day Trumka complained about the need for action, Obama spent nearly five hours on the beach with his family, then went to dinner with friends.

Now Obama is promising a new jobs plan — after he returns from the beach. The AFL-CIO chief, for one, is worried it will be the same old mix of tax breaks, infrastructure banks and patent reforms. "That's not going to get the job done," he said.

That is why the labor boss has, in his private sessions with Obama and in his meeting with reporters, urged Obama to demand more than he expects. "You need leadership with a sharp cutting edge to say, 'This is what I stand for, this is what they stand for,'" Trumka said. "Give them the narrative about why it will work," rather than "more of the same of, 'we're muddling along.'"

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CLOCKWISE, PHOTOS COURTESY OF JIM CARRIER, MISSISSIPPI DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY/TOURISM DIVISION, ALABAMA TOURISM DEPARTMENT, ASSOCIATED PRESS, MISSISSIPPI DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY/TOURISM DIVISION (INSET)
Clockwise from top left: The Alabama Capitol with Dexter Avenue Church at right; the Bryant's Grocery marker in Mississippi; the Edmund Pettus Bridge, site of the "Bloody Sunday" conflict on March 7, 1965, in Alabama; the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery, Ala. Inset: The back panel of the Bryant's Grocery marker. All the Mississippi Freedom Trail sites have markers.

Honoring freedom's path

BY JIM CARRIER

The metaphor behind the design of the new Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial is lost on no one in the remote and ordinary spots where the civil rights movement unfolded.

"With this faith, we will be able to hew out of a mountain of despair a stone of hope," King said in his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech.

Across the South, a half-century of difficult hewing has produced dozens of memorials to the still highly charged scenes of murders, marches and triumphs. Among them, bus stops, lunch counters, a bridge and schools.

The first black president could shine a spotlight on this string of human rights pearls by securing U.N. World Heritage designation for the civil rights movement.

When I moved to Alabama in 1999, most civil rights sites were unmarked, and many had been destroyed. Tourism offices and historical groups, out of racism and guilt, refused to embrace this great gift to the world. Rosa Parks, for example, had to share a street sign with Hank Williams.

That has changed enormously. Now, in Montgomery, there are two Rosa Parks museums — one for children with a Disney-like "ride" back to the 1950s — a city-sponsored civil rights trail, and new museums dedicated to Freedom Riders and the 1965 voting rights march.

In 2008, Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery, where King used to preach, along with two African American churches in Birmingham (Bethel Baptist and 16th Street Baptist) were recognized by the Interior Department as worthy of world heritage status as sites key to the civil rights movement. They were put on a "tentative list" for eventual nomination as cultural icons that "had a profound influence on human rights movements elsewhere in the world, particularly regarding nonviolent social change."

But the National Park Service will need to add

more movement sites to win UNESCO's exacting approval, a process that would take staff time and money, according to Stephen Morris, chief of international affairs at the National Park Service.

Chiseling new narratives into southern stone is a difficult task. The South is shadowed by the Civil War, arguments over who owns history and cynicism at turning human rights tales into tourist trails. But such hewing has led to reconciliation, the airing of centuries-old grievances and an integration of history that, until recently, was as "Jim Crowed" as water fountains were in the 1960s.

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Case in point: Money, Miss., a dried-up spot in the Delta between the old Yazoo & Mississippi Valley rail line and the turgid Tallahatchie River, infamous for being the site of the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till on Aug. 21, 1955. I consider it the most haunted of Mississippi civil rights sites, the crumbling bricks of Bryant's Grocery a palpable reminder of the isolation and fear that surrounded blacks.

On May 18, the state of Mississippi, with Gov. Haley Barbour's support, erected in front of the store a historical marker that describes Till's death and significance. It includes a quote from Rosa Parks recalling her action four months after: "I thought of Emmett Till, and when the bus driver ordered me to move to the back, I just couldn't

move." When Till's cousin Wheeler Parker said to the dedication crowd, "This is the spot where we were when we came out of that store," even tourism officials felt a chill, recalled Ward Emling, Mississippi's manager of film and cultural heritage, in an interview.

Few realized that as the ceremony took place, another small drama was playing out. The store is now owned by the grandchildren of one of the jurors who acquitted Till's murderers — men who later confessed in *Look* magazine. The juror and his all-white companions are pictured on the marker. Yet his granddaughter cooperated in finding a spot for the marker, vetted its content and advocated for it within her family, according to the marker's designer, Allan Hammons. "For them to become advocates, letting go and doing the right thing is a powerful statement," he told me.

The Till marker was the first of 25 markers to be erected on a "Mississippi Freedom Trail" — this in a state notorious for more lynchings (more than 500 between 1890 and 1950) and more civil rights murders (40 between 1954 and 1968) than any other state. Their sacrifice eventually led to the election of 800 black people to public office.

The trail was the third major civil rights initiative taken by the state in the past half-year. In December, Mississippi became the first state in the nation to require a civil rights curriculum in kindergarten through 12th grade. In January, Barbour pushed through the legislature \$15 million as seed money for a Mississippi civil rights museum — a move widely linked to his presidential aspirations but one that will lead to the first state civil rights museum in the United States.

Mississippi's consequential efforts are precisely the kind of story deserving of world heritage designation.

Jim Carrier is author of "A Traveler's Guide to the Civil Rights Movement."

OMBUDSMAN PATRICK B. PEXTON

Desperately seeking Ron Paul

Has The Post given Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul short shrift in coverage?

The ombudsman, like most mainstream media outlets, got hit with a wave of pro-Paul e-mails just after the Aug. 13 Iowa straw poll in which the Texas representative finished a few corn silk strands behind Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann. I received more e-mails after the most recent national Gallup Poll showed Paul ahead of Bachmann and third behind Texas Gov. Rick Perry and former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney.

Paul supporters think these results put him into the top tier of candidates. But most of the major television stories that followed the Iowa event, as Jon Stewart so aptly lampooned, barely mentioned Paul.

Overall, The Post's record on Paul coverage is sparse.

The Post's main politics blog, The Fix by Chris Cillizza and compatriots, had by far the most coverage of Paul of any of The Post's publishing venues, with about nine posts mainly or substantially about Paul, but dozens more where he is mentioned once or twice along with the other GOP candidates. If you're a print reader, you don't see much of this, but I've compiled it all on the Omblog. Cillizza also was one of the few political analysts before the Iowa poll saying that Paul could place first or second in the poll.

The analysis of Paul's campaign on The Fix, and in fuller staff-written stories for print and online, has been accurate but also somewhat dismissive. Post political correspondents Dan Balz and Philip

Rucker declared on Aug. 14 that Perry, Romney and Bachmann were the top tier, with barely a reference to Ron Paul.

Paul's national press secretary, Gary Howard, is frustrated. He said his candidate has "proven himself to be at least in the top four." He said he looks at The Post Politics Web site and sees a story, brief or blog post almost every day about Perry, Romney and Bachmann. So why not on Paul?

Steven Ginsberg, The Post's national political editor, countered that Paul has "gotten every bit of the coverage he deserves. We covered him quite a bit over all our platforms... We take him seriously."

The Post looks at several factors in assigning reporters to the GOP field, Ginsberg said, including national and state polling data, and the credibility and robustness of the candidate's campaign organization, as well as how much money he or she has raised.

Ginsberg said he has noticed Paul's uptick in recent polls, his good fundraising record and his stronger campaign team. He said that after Labor Day more coverage would be coming.

Still, The Post's coverage of Paul looks thin compared with its stories on Bachmann. In the past six months, The Post has published online or in print 34 staff-written stories plus 12 wire service stories on Bachmann, who has served not even five years in the House, and that doesn't count the blog posts about her on The Fix or Glenn Kessler's Fact Checker pieces. The Post published 19 staff-written stories on former House speaker Newt Gingrich in that time, plus one wire story and many blog posts.

On Paul, a congressman for more than 20 years, who was No. 2 in fundraising after Romney in the last report, The Post has published just three full stories, a couple more that had large sections on him along with other candidates, two wire stories and The Fix blog posts.

Ginsberg acknowledged the gap in coverage but said there were valid news reasons for it. Gingrich's campaign imploded when most of his senior staff walked out in June. Bachmann did well in the first debate of the season in June in New Hampshire, raised a lot of money quickly, was rising in the polls and won the Iowa straw poll. Plus, Ginsberg said, she is a new face whom a lot of readers don't know well and want more information about, unlike Paul who ran nationally four years ago and is more familiar.

I think The Post could have done much better on Ron Paul. But my fondest hope is that in addition to the horse-race, campaign-finance and personality stories, we see in-depth stories on how the candidates stand on the issues.

Ron Paul, for example, is always referred to as a libertarian, but many of his positions are at odds with that ideology. And he wants to abolish the federal income, estate, capital gains and gasoline taxes, which together make up about half of the U.S. government's annual revenue. Which half of the government would he eliminate?

He hasn't said. Readers want to know.

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