



# **Brain on Fire: Confronting the burning issues of today . . . and tomorrow.**

*Lawrence C. Marsh*

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# Brain on Fire: Confronting the burning issues of today . . . and tomorrow.

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*Brain on Fire* is a collection of 81 essays that explore with expertise, humor and imagination topics such as U.S. energy policy, new approaches to education, challenges to economic theory such as behavioral economics, current economic policy, medical research methods, behavioral motivations and incentives, foreign affairs, health policies and speculation about the technology of the future. (Also see *Predictably Irrational* by Dan Ariely, *Freakonomics* by Steve Levitt and Steve Dunbar, and *Nudge* by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein.) The essays range from a proposal for a self-adjusting price floor on gasoline to the consequences of allowing California to have its own currency to the impact of stem cells and nanosurgery on what it means to be human. They were selected from columns that Professor Marsh wrote for the Kansas City Star. Our political leadership has trapped itself in a rather simplistic framework for policy analysis. Our media-driven, one-dimensional, liberal-conservative perspective causes a political impasse on Capitol Hill. *Brain on Fire* takes us into new dimensions. The incentive dimension sheds new light on our failing schools, our rising health care costs and our ineffective efforts to deal with the energy crisis. *Brain on Fire* explores educational video games such as "Adventures in Mathematics" to tap into the younger generation's addiction to interactive media. It suggests more effective ways of analyzing the results of randomized medical trials to make better use of digitized medical records to individualize patient prognosis and protocols. It proposes a variable tariff on crude oil imports and a dynamic, self-adjusting price floor on gasoline to stabilize petroleum markets to protect green jobs and alternative energy initiatives while avoiding job-killing price increases. The autonomy dimension provides insight into everything from student motivation and self-directed health care to our diminishing manufacturing employment and the expanding role for Internet entrepreneurs. In this new economy many people face the same reality as our cave dwelling ancestors where the only way to get a job is to create your own. Economic theory and practice take center stage on the domestic front, along with health care, education and energy policies. Financial insecurity and permanent job losses unmask problems with economic theory as do irrational behaviors revealed in research by behavioral economists. *Brain on Fire* addresses 21st century challenges in technology that are simultaneously enabling and invasive. Topics include demise of newspapers, conflicts between Wall Street and Main Street, impact of immigration on job losses and job creation, and the global warming debate. *Brain on Fire* reveals the damage done to our economy by dramatic fluctuations in the price of crude oil. Sudden, short-term price drops wipe out promising new technology initiatives as creditors force green enterprises into bankruptcy after a few months in the red. *Brain on Fire* proposes dynamic, self-adjusting price floors to help stabilize our economy and protect our new energy technologies. *Brain on Fire* explores the major role played by the trade-off between external freedom and internal freedom in foreign affairs, most notably in Iraq, Iran and China, as well as in the United States, right after 9/11, when we gave up some of our internal freedom by allowing more government wiretapping. In "Future World" *Brain on Fire* explores the implications of new technologies where stem cells and nanosurgery present both practical and ethical dilemmas.

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