In their polemical topic-comment contribution Lappin, Levine and Johnson (henceforth LLJ), claim that ‘former GB adherents’ have ‘abandoned that theoretical framework and much of its conceptual framework virtually overnight’, and in its place ‘have adopted an approach which as far as we can tell is in no way superior with respect to either predictive capabilities or explanatory power’. They have furthermore done so uncritically, ‘on the basis of Chomsky’s personal authority’. All this ‘suggests that in large sections of the field theoretical commitment has little to do with evidence or argument’.

As I am presumably, in the eyes of LLJ, one of those former GB adherents whose integrity is called into question, I feel the need to defend myself against their accusations.

LLJ are wrong in a number of respects. I would like to take up one point in particular: It is simply not true that there are no empirical reasons to prefer the MP, say in the version outlined in Chomsky (1993), over a standard version of GB theory. A crucial difference between the MP and GB theory is the abolishment of D-structure as a level of representation in the MP, thus abolishment of lexical insertion as an all-at-once operation in favor of some form of strictly cyclic lexical access, with parallel derivations of subtrees which are joined by generalized transformations. Chomsky (1993) discusses, although only briefly, an argument against D-structure, namely the argument from Tough-movement, and gives references to other works which present empirical justification for the existence of generalized transformations. Since LLJ may have overlooked this argument, I will repeat it here.

As noted in Chomsky (1977), following Lasnik and Fiengo (1974), among others, and further discussed in Chomsky (1981), (1) cannot be derived by movement of John from the embedded object position to the matrix subject position, essentially since the resulting chain would have two cases. Instead the source of the gap in the embedded clause is a
wh-type movement, which moves an empty operator to spec,CP of the embedded clause, as shown in (1b):

(1)a. John is easy to talk to.

b. John is easy [Op[[PRO to talk to t]]]

But then how is John inserted? Crucially, it cannot be inserted at D-structure, since the matrix subject position is a non-theta position. Chomsky (1981) proposes that the matrix subject is inserted exceptionally at S-structure, being linked to the theta-role assigned by the embedded predicate by the help of a reanalysis. (An alternative proposed in Chomsky 1977 is that the matrix subject is linked to the embedded object chain by a process of predication similar to the one linking the head of a relative to a theta-position in the relative clause.) But this account runs into a serious problem when the subject is a complex NP or a clause, itself containing theta-role-assigning categories, as in (2a, b):

(2)a. That John likes pro-wrestling is hard to understand.

b. Pictures of Mary are easy to sell.

When these subjects are inserted at S-structure, it will be too late for like or picture to assign their theta-roles. It seems quite obvious that the theta-roles must already be assigned at the point when the complex subjects are inserted. In other words, the complex subject is derived in parallel with the easy-construction, with theta-role assignment, movement, and perhaps case-assignment all taking place in parallel structures, which are eventually merged. Afterwards the derived structure undergoes further operations, including linking of the matrix subject with the embedded object chain. But if parallel derivation and generalized transformations are allowed in principle, why not assume that this is how syntactic structures are always constructed?1

But such an account amounts to giving up D-structure, an important theoretical construct in GB theory. If Case-assignment applies cyclically in the course of the derivation of the subtrees which are eventually merged to form full sentential structures (so that for example of is inserted in (2b) before the complex NP is merged with the predicate), then one important reason for keeping S-structure as a level of representation is lost, as well.

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1 Tough-movement remains an exceptional sort of construction – shown by the fact that many languages apparently do not allow it – but the exceptionality probably has to do with the operation linking the matrix subject to the embedded object chain, rather than with the manner that the matrix subject is introduced in the structure.