

Mostly Red

From and to the heart of the United States of America

Though difficult to say with what historical importance the 2004 US presidential election will be viewed in the years ahead, with so much wealth and power concentrated in so few hands the two themes of this year's inauguration ceremony -- 19th century US American expansionism and 20th century resource conservation -- should underscore our need for concern. Indeed, are we looking at the front and back sides of the same CD-pack, or should we take seriously the chronology of these two historical periods and expect the United States to finally put its national house in order?

DESPAIR

Clearly, many US Americans are still frightened by the 911 tragedy, for Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda are alive and growing. No dysfunction here. Who, though, should be more frightened? A happily married Democrat mother with two children living in New York City, or a single Republican retiree working part-time in West Lafayette, Indiana. New Yorkers voted Blue; the State of Indiana voted Red.

Bringing down Saddam Hussein appeared to many to be a heroic act, and Saddam Hussein's trial is unlikely to improve his world image. Still, many agree that important mistakes were made with regard to the US decision to invade Iraq. Certainly US conduct after the invasion has been mixed. Of course, the world is not perfect, and it is difficult to imagine a greater potential source of human error than war. Simply, could we have not expected better from a world leader such as the United States? A well-known fable from La Fontaine teaches us that replacing a dictator with a democratic government in the absence of a clear understanding

of democratic process is not a good idea.¹ In effect, it will take more than a national election to secure a strong hold for democracy in Iraq. Are the Reds prepared to stay so long?

That there be no mistake! What is more brutish? Watching the beheading of a kneeling man on world television or being crushed by the debris of a 500-ton bunker-buster that falls unexpectedly out of nowhere on your neighbor's home? Truly, it is both frightening and disappointing to think that the leader of the free world could even contemplate spreading world democracy with the butt of a gun. Unfortunately, this appears to be what has happened.

The Vietnam War was the writing on the wall. Unfortunately, the writing passed nearly unnoticed during the election campaign, as the war was used by both sides as a means to soil the personal military records of the other side's candidate. Had it really been so hard to understand that tearing down the statues of a dictator and occupying his palaces in your own land are not the same as doing these in someone else's? The overthrow of the Taliban and the recent election of Hamid Karzai — America's favorite Afghani — made for great television programming in the US. It also soothed America's wounded pride in the wake of 911. The Afghanistan cat is anything but on the rug, however. Where would Hamid Karzai be today without his US and NATO body guards?

After four centuries of European colonialism, a Revolutionary War, a Civil War,

¹ Jean de la Fontaine. "Les grenouilles qui demandent un roi". Fables de la Fontaine. Livre troisième. Fable IV. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966. Also, Famille Vidaud. Jean de la Fontaine. [online document] <<http://www.jdlf.com/lesfables/livreiii/lesgrenouillesquidemandentunroi>> (2 January 2005).

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several border wars, the Vietnam War, and a war of ideology never before witnessed in the history of humankind, one might have expected greater wisdom emanating from a country that prides itself in diversity, tolerance, openness, and a free and democratic spirit. Alas, only American post-Cold War triumphalism can explain the arrogance with which the United States government moved into Iraq against the better judgment of two of its principal postwar allies, Germany and France. Need it be said that the Cold War was not won by the US alone?

Empire is a projection of a nation's strength. It is also a temporary, external political fix for unresolved, domestic social issues and political unrest. Consequent to its government's aggression against another nation the citizenry of the aggressor nation is placed at risk. It is this risk that binds together the aggressor nation's citizenry and allows its national leaders to push aside, or put on hold, difficult domestic issues. The United States' domestic problems are many: crime, poverty, drugs, homelessness, environmental degradation, family breakdown, over consumption, racial discrimination, over-crowded prisons, hate crimes, joblessness, and on and on. Most of these problems, however, are concentrated in big cities, far away from the rustic, countryside dwellings of sparsely populated regions of the United States. Many of these problems are also somewhat distant from the dwellings of second generation suburban dwellers, whose parents once found it easier to flee these problems, rather than resolve them. Was it not these rural and semi-rural citizens to whom Bush and his imperial cabinet appealed during the last election campaign with incessant calls of freedom, democracy, and an end to terrorism and dictatorial governments the world over. In effect, these rural dwellers live in a reality apart that is inexorably linked to the reality that they reject.

It is clear to most that no single country can cure the ills of the entire world; it is also clear that one bellicose nation, bent on the building of an empire, can leave massive destruction in its wake. The temptation to shirk the resolution of domestic problems in the name of empire can only occur when the technological gap between the aggressor nation and those whom it seeks to dominate, or bully through armed force, is sufficiently large. Never in the history of humankind has the temptation to build empire been so great, for never has the technological gap between the haves and have-nots of our world been so large. Over half of all Americans have fallen victim to this temptation.

HOPE

Fortunately, what made geo-political sense in a world without instantaneous communication, rapid transport, and high-speed data archiving and processing, no longer applies. In short, the important gaps in time and space that once made it possible to deceive entire nations is rapidly disappearing. In effect, we have entered an age in which government deception, although still widespread, is becoming increasingly difficult. Both private and public sector data bases are available to anyone who has the means, and information that one cannot obtain from one government can often be obtained from another. These bits and pieces of information, thus gathered, can be compared, contrasted, and reconstructed into a reasonably accurate picture of the whole. In short, the only empires anyone ought to be building today are corporate, for these are competitive, must yield the right of force to their host governments, and can be readily monitored. This is an important source of hope.

JESUS CHRIST AND ADAM SMITH

There appear to be two kinds of Reds:

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those who read selected passages from the New Testament; and those who carry unopened copies of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.² Both wield swords of advanced technology. Their tidings are the same, "We, the believers, condemn the nonbelievers, and everyone else should take heed". In effect, what makes Reds so very different from those whom they seek to intimidate is the technology used to temper the steel of their swords. Science, the key to technological advancement and market development, was born when Galileo Galilei stood before the Pope with his telescope and demonstrated that the religious rhetoric of the day was a poor substitute for what the naked eye could observe through a hollow cylinder. No, the sun did not rotate around the earth then, nor does it rotate around the earth now!

Whether tidings from the devil's messenger or from a heretical Wahhabist, the message that Osama bin Laden is sending to the West is the same genre of message that the Reds have recently sent to the White House -- "Protect the homeland", "Preserve our way of life!" Now you may accept glory before God in an imagined paradise called Heaven as a reasonable vision of the future, but you probably reject mutual destruction of enemy and self as a means to achieve that glory. But wait! That we withhold judgment until we have heard both sides!

THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

Consider our current, ever-rising, sometimes falling GNP, growing social and biological environmental destruction, over indulgence in personal consumption, and imperial design. Are these an attractive alternative to firebrand Wahhabism?

² Adam Smith. 1723 - 1790. An inquiry to the nature and causes of the wealth of nations. [online document] <<http://www.bibliomania.com/2/1/65/112/frameset.html>> (2 January 2005).

You say, "Excess consumption and environmental destruction are negative secondary effects brought about by a greater social good called rising GNP". Did I also hear, "Beating down a known bully can hardly be considered an act of imperial aggression, no matter the breach of international law that permits it". Let us not belabor mute issues and go straight to the books: the book in your hand and the one in your purse or back pocket.

Rising GNP is not just a matter of job creation, better technology, and enhanced personal consumption. What GNP measures is the ability of a society to pass human activity through a cash register. Accordingly, it also measures a society's ability to label, package, and quantify human endeavor so that it can be tabulated, entered onto a spread sheet, and reduced to a single number called price.

Surely you have seen the picture of a naked woman, whose physical parts are portrayed like cuts of meat in the diagram of a cow at your local butcher! This is what rising GNP is doing to human endeavor, social organization, and our environment. What is worse, those parts of human endeavor that cannot be neatly carved, packaged, and sold, are being discarded as social waste. This *waste product*, as it were, is the nonquantifiable aspects of human interaction that bond people together in close intimate human relationships. In effect, what the market is discarding is the very mortar that holds humanity together in warmth and friendship.

The freely traded labour services and roving financial capital of today's global market place may bestow our national work forces with personal freedoms only experienced by our prehistoric ancestors homo erectus, but they are also destroying human society the world over. Psychologists and large stuffed dolls have become surrogates for friendship, and

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the extended family has been replaced with church groups, athletic clubs, poetry circles, nursing homes, mental health clinics, the humane society, and a whole assortment of other only somewhat satisfactory attempts to replace the once stable, but flexible bonding of extended family. Parental musical chairs appears to be a fairly accurate description of the state of at least half of the West's nuclear families. Now, should we be surprised that so many Reds want to rekindle forgotten Christian traditions? On the other hand, are Osama's followers so very different?

No matter their creed, fundamentalists around the world have recognized an important failing of modern society. For more than four centuries the West has developed market principals and universally binding notions of jurisprudence that have drained the cultural wetlands of human intimacy, warmth, and compassion, and have desecrated the human hearth.

Alas, we can no more turn our backs on the Enlightenment than we can on the market place. What we can and must do, however, is to confront technological advancement as it arises, and temper it so that we do not return to the Dark Ages of religious rebirth. Religion blinds as much as it illuminates and is thus as dangerous as it is useful. No, we should not discourage its practice, but we must understand it for what it is -- a self-serving, sometimes open, sometimes closed, collective opinion about the way the world is and should be.

The restoration of Christian ideals may bring comfort to some or even many, but it is no more a panacea for the destruction of our cultural and biological environments than are the Islamic and Buddhist faiths. What rural America and Iraqi and Afghani tribes all share in common is a desire to preserve their way of life and their homeland, and to remain secure in

a global market place that threatens to destroy their cherished ways of life.

Surely, the Chimera of courage and brotherhood that al Qaeda represents for much of the Muslim world must be slain, but its message must not be ignored. What many in the East are seeking to preserve, many others in the West are seeking to revive.

That al Qaeda is able to live in Western society and still seek its destruction is an important part of its message. Western societies are both open and vulnerable, but our wealth and opulence are not nearly as convincing to others as they are to ourselves. Al Qaeda does not have the solution to our world's ills, but it has stumbled upon a very important weakness of Western democracies. Weaknesses that need to be addressed, if humankind is to advance as something more than an engine to its own destruction.

The Reds have either fled the ailing social and biological environments that plague our world's urban centers, or they have never experienced them. The rest of us will surely continue to encourage globalism, but we must do so with respect toward not only our own local culture, tradition, and language, but also those of others.

CONCLUSION

Now, it might just be that celebrating America's 19th century expansionism is the correct thing to do, because it places a realistic limit on where empire in the history of *USAmerica* should stop.