

## A View from the Covered Wagon

# Thoughts on America's Role in the World

Leave it to law school reunions, the availability of senior citizen discounts looming on the horizon, and September 11 to make one reflect on the state of the world.

I am old enough to remember when the entire town of Billings, Montana turned out at the airport to see the first jet airplane land (after the antelope were chased off the landing strip) and black and white television first arrived, with only one channel for four hours a day.

I started my international law practice 32 years ago in New York City with a French law firm, Coudert Freres, ironically formed when three of Napoleon's aides had to flee France. One of the senior partners had fought in the Crimean War in Turkey; another had the easiest job in town as Honorary Consul for Monaco, which meant he got invited to all the best parties. Computers and word processors were not widespread. The "IBM Selectric" typewriter was state of the art. To communicate overseas, young associates learned how to use a very slow telex machine, the electronic version of the slide rule.

Since then I have worked in London, England and Hong Kong and handled transactions in 90 countries, including a distributorship agreement for flashlight batteries in Afghanistan before the Russians invaded.

I have had the privilege of dining at the Charles V in Paris, eating pepper soup in a mud hut in Dolekeh, Liberia, and sampling sea slugs in Changchung, Manchuria while on a business trip for Chrysler. While the outward appearances of my dinner companions differed in each setting, the fact remains that they all are humans, with similar desires and dreams: lead a productive life, have a loving family, live in safe and pleasant surroundings, enjoy ample food and clothing, send their children to good schools.

What is the point of all these old stories? In a few words, it is that the passage of time

and experience has shown me that while technology may change rapidly, human behavior does not, and to practice successfully in today's world, we must understand other cultures and perspective.

When tragic events occur and countries become at odds with one another, it is easier to hate a person who fits a stereotype than deal with the ambiguity of distinguishing between the politics at the time from the people in that country. We can dislike the behavior of the leaders, while still appreciating the citizens. Wasn't it interesting that in the recent war in Iraq, it was an Iraqi lawyer who risked his life to help save Jessica Lynch?

In the midst of the Balkans War and the terrible atrocities inflicted on civilians by both Serbs and Muslims, people speak of all Serbs as being evil and vile perpetrators of genocide, but I cannot forget gentler times when Yugoslavia was all one nation and a "moderate" Communist state countering the Soviet Union. I cannot forget Gordanna Bajic, an AFS student who lived with us, and the hospitality her family showed us when we visited Belgrade.

When Ghaddafi took over Libya, and Khomeini and his followers took over Iran, their countries immediately became Category A enemies on the Trading with the Enemy Act list. Yet I remember the Libyan oil worker trainees my father entertained in the U.S. who showed us pictures of their families and the good-natured Iranians running the Ever-ready battery plant in Teheran, proud of their improved quality scores.

When I was a child in Montana, the Soviets were the "Evil Empire;" yet now U.S. armed forces are using their bases in the war against terror. In the late 70s, while sailing in the waters around Hong Kong, I frequently would encounter the ghastly remains of refugees who had taped themselves to Styrofoam blocks and tried swimming across Mirs Bay to flee the "Red" Chinese on the main-

land. From my office on the top floor of the AIT Tower in Hong Kong, I watched the British navy tow the bathtub-sized sampans of Vietnamese refugees who had just crossed the open waters of the South China Sea arriving in the only port in southeast Asia willing to accept them. Yet today, the U.S. has offices in Vietnam and the largest companies in Michigan banded together to obtain preferential trading privileges for China.

In other words, the French were correct when they said "plus ca change..."—the more things change, the more they stay the same. Today's enemies can be tomorrow's trading partners and vice versa. Only change is permanent—wait long enough and things come full circle—whether they be hemlines or business partners.

I am the great, great, great grandson of a Confederate general yet my largest client last year, a wonderful and highly respected business person, is the black president of several companies and on the board of directors of three publicly-traded companies.

Shortly after the tragedy of September 11, I was in a bible study group, when one of the suburban matrons volunteered that every Muslim was a terrorist. Judging all Muslims by the acts of a few is equal to judging all Christians by the Jonestown, Guyana suicide or David Khoresh in Waco.

I remember traveling in "mammy wagons"—old World War II trucks—in the jungles of Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa. Suddenly the truck stopped and everyone jumped off with their prayer rugs to pray towards Mecca. Frequently, a prayer rug, a pot, and the clothes on their backs were all that most of the people could afford. As a life long Episcopalian, I know of no counterpart. Many of my fellow Christians view attendance at a Shrove Tuesday pancake supper as the height of religious fervor.

We have a duty to help others keep world events in perspective and prevent politicians

*"... nations are never their own masters . . . Providence has not created mankind entirely independent or entirely free."*

— Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Chapter 57 (1835); abridged edition by Richard D. Heffner, p 317 (1956)

*"... America has made good use of her blessings, especially in her internal life but also in her foreign relations. Having done so much and succeeded so well, America is now at that historical point at which a great nation is in danger of losing its perspective on what exactly is within the realm of its power and what is beyond it. Other great nations, reaching this critical juncture, have aspired to too much and by overextension of effort, have declined and then fallen . . . power tends to confuse itself with virtue and a great nation is peculiarly susceptible to the idea that its power is a sign of God's favor, conferring upon it a special responsibility for other nations . . . to remake them . . . in its own shining image."*

— U.S. Senator J. William Fulbright, former Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *The Arrogance of Power*, p 3 (1966)

*"Politics and business are intertwined; add other cultures and the mixture is potent. The need for knowledge, instead of stereotypes, is imperative. Today's enemies can become tomorrow's trading partners."*

— Howard B. Hill (2003)

from making policy based on cultural myopia. It is incumbent on us to study the history of civilizations and recognize that every great country can be blinded by the allure of power.

At the same time, America must also become proactive in certain areas. We must use our experience and talents to ensure that U.S. foreign policy treats the causes as well as the symptoms of these troubled areas. Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, "terrorist leaders" attract followers because they tap into the pent-up frustrations of people who feel unfairly treated and powerless under current regimes—people who have nothing to lose.

Regardless of which side one takes in the Middle East or Ireland or Columbia, ignor-

ing the causes is putting a bucket under a leak instead of fixing a roof. Given the span of 3,000 years of human history, no single group has had exclusive claim to a particular geographic area.

We must fend off special interest politics and take time to consider the viewpoints of all concerned parties. Unless and until we adopt a more even-handed approach in practice, the cycle of violence will continue in certain geographic areas. When your family has been hurt by some third party, it is no longer an abstract issue; the end result will be some form of retribution unless an equitable system is in place.

In short, as technology has brought the world into our living rooms, we have a duty to educate ourselves and our colleagues about

other cultures. If you think it is too difficult, imagine our grandchildren dealing with cultures of another galaxy! ◆



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