8 PM - 1980s On empires and language

"What of the 1980s?"

"That was the decade when the equation changed even if people didn't know it yet. Ronald Reagan warned of evil empires, Gorbachev pursued *glasnost*, and Pink Floyd's *We don't need no education*, from *The Wall* was banned by South Africa's apartheid government. Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu registered typewriters only to be hounded from power and executed. An Orwellian smash of Big Brother's TV screen debuted the Apple Macintosh in 1984, and, in Orwellian irony, that was the year personal computers partnered with Ethernet networking to become practical in newspapers. An unrecognized pivot point in history, those networked personal computers began to undermine the control empires could hold on individuals. It was as if having read *1984*, people were repelled and vowed to defend against it."

"What made the difference?"

"As internal networking developed, IBM discovered it had to make a hard choice: either control internal network content or liberate the economic creativity that networking allowed. A networked organism could have control or creativity, but not both. In IBM's case, they decided to favor creativity that fostered economic development. Countries behind the iron curtain faced the same dilemma. To network to compete against Reagan's economically powered arms race risked losing control."

"So collapse was likely.'"

"Sooner or later. Tightly controlled communications reveal that efficiency is a false façade within empires. Centralized inefficiency throttles the ability to cope. The Great Wall of China was either a remarkable human achievement of central government to protect citizens or a squandering of millions of

man-hours of human capital that might otherwise have been unleashed to challenge the marauding hordes and improve quality of life.

"Competition managed with a light hand sets individuals free to maximize wealth. Competition, like science, prunes that which is unproductive and the extra wealth that is generated opens options that otherwise might not be available. Dutch dikes were built through government coordination, but privately created wealth allowed the option. A strong check on centralization is required to assure government is not hijacked to build a great wall or to charge after the next trendy political pet rock."

"But with the collapse of the superpower standoff, didn't you wonder if, without a countervailing force, having a single surviving superpower would be dangerous to the independence of others?"

"That question was put to rest by Harry Truman and the Marshall Plan, when Americans did not colonize Japan or Germany but lifted them from rubble to individual, economic, political, and national independence."

"Do you think America is misunderstood?"

"Both at home and abroad."

"How so?"

"America is different from the scores of empires throughout history that yearned to rule the four corners of the world: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, China, Greece, Rome, the Mongols, the Ottomans, Spain, France, England, France again, England again, Germany, Japan, Russia, and China yet again. Empire is dominion of area not your own.

"America did expand across the frontier two hundred years ago, like any empire, but one cannot be held hostage to history, and should only learn from it. The mature America became a reluctant empire. It did not start World War I to expand empire, but entered the war to face down countries that did. It did not start World War II to expand empire, but entered the war to face down those who did. Since then, it has reluctantly entered to oppose expansionism and to fill political vacuums an inadequate

United Nations has never stepped in to fill. Once the wars were over, Americans retreated to their traditional boundaries, asking, as Colin Powell reminded former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey at Davos, Switzerland, in the 20th century, when America has risked all to defeat abusive power, we have asked for nothing except enough ground to bury our dead, and returned home to seek our own lives in peace.

"America transitioned from an empire that projected dominion over area, to an empire that projected ideas worth living that others could decide for themselves to value. Those who protest America's so-called lust for empire should reassess their shallow understanding of history.

"War is misunderstood, so people toy with it. War can be more fearsome than frequently realized because participants have the option to set aside morality to fight using any weapon. That is a lesson for everyone. 'No rules' is a nasty place to be. I am a pacifist for good reason because I, with other pacifists and good generals, understand honestly what war is. So do all who have ever fought one. In war consequences are uncertain. That is the point of *Apocalypse Now*. We defeated ourselves in war in Vietnam because we didn't understand, while some of our enemies did, the willingness to set aside principles. We have to encourage the kind of thoughtfulness that will make war an anachronism. We have to be willing to resort to no rules, but to choose, for now not to do so. That is the encouragement to join a durable and effective process of problem resolution."

"Why has American empire been different?"

"Look at the rise and fall of empires. Command authority was typically religion. Empires of faith ruled in early Rome from the first century BC to the second century AD with Jupiter and the Caesars. The Holy Roman Empire followed with Christianity, Islam ruled in the Middle East, Catholic Christianity in Spain, up until the 1700s and the Age of Enlightenment. Even succeeding empires like the Soviet Union and China have been secularly religious."

"Absent religion, what is an effective substitute for ordering dealings with others?"

"Not democracy."

"Why not?

"Democracy is often assumed to be a principle, but it is more a tool like a screwdriver or pliers. It is a process, not a goal. 'Let's bring democracy to the world' is as much a prescription for disaster as demanding autocracy or oligarchy. Each can be abused."

"What, then, offers a plausible, safer future?"

"Nothing so dramatic as a cry for freedom that has fizzled more than once. The French Revolution ostensibly valued liberty, equality, and fraternity. Their Declaration of the Rights of Man called for all to be free and equal. But along the way everything old and useful was jettisoned costing them the good lessons of history. Much earlier, Augustus gave Romans the appearance of freedom. Personally, and economically, citizens were given great latitude, but not at the political level. Augustus believed that Romans were no longer worthy of a republic, and that proved to be the case."

"What if I don't want freedom? What if I don't want the uncertainty of a market economy?"

"Freedom has never been a driving force for society. Complacent populations who prefer order and security have regularly rejected freedom. Successful empires in over the last centuries show people would gratefully trade freedom for security. They have not learned to fear the consequences, or are afraid of future insecurity. It's understandable to want not to have to work and to be taken care of regardless. It's reasonable to want to avoid dirty jobs if that's all that are left to be done. If 'Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' aren't really your style, it's not freedom you would forgo, but responsibility. You don't care to take responsibility for your own life, because you don't want to face that you might fail. Afraid for the future, you don't trust yourself to compete and call your own fear 'compassion for others.' For your security, which freedom would you sacrifice?"

"There are more than one?"

"I have already mentioned four enumerated by Prof. Rufus Fears: individual freedom where others are tolerant of behavior, economic freedom to own what you earn, political freedom to select your type of government and governors, and national freedom to live independently of foreign rulers. But consider two reasons why order and security aren't worth the price of lost freedom. Dreams for order and security never match reality. Those dreams are appeals by the power elite who would game the system for themselves. Look at bad behavior swept under the rugs day after day by politicians who turn a blind eye to their own misbehavior yet who would punish you for the same indiscretions. Perhaps the highest quality of life ever enjoyed was that of Roman citizens 2000 years ago. They traded away their political and national freedom for individual and economic freedom. They gave up responsibility to choose their government and to defend their empire for the freedom to trade and choose their own lifestyle—and lost it all to greed and bad governance."

"You said there were two?"

"The second reason for freedom is your quality of life. In America, the least of us enjoy a standard of living of which others around the world can only dream. Natural resources or empire are not the reason, but a market economy that allows inventiveness and dynamic corrections by individuals."

"Then freedom is a sound and worthwhile principle?"

"I don't call it a principle. People need freedom, but they don't want it. They need free and unfettered communication with feedback loops so that what is said can be checked by any individual who cares to do so."

"What kind of freedom matters?"

"The freedom that matters was described by Justice Hugo L. Black in *Times v. Sullivan* in 1964, 'An unconditional right to say what one pleases about public affairs is what I consider to be the minimum guarantee of the First Amendment.' If you are afraid of speech, you do not trust people. If you do not trust anyone but yourself, then we have no reason to trust you either."

"But free speech is a modern creation."

"Socrates' *Apology*, by Plato, was a test of free speech. Beyond that, it asked the question who has the right to teach students, and that is the real question—who governs. Socrates pitted philosophy against the poets. Oracular and committed to feelings, poets stood for fiction and legend. Their virtues were the warlike qualities that Socrates opposed. Socrates represented a claim staked in favor of a wholesale transition in how to think and how to govern—a claim as yet unresolved. How to govern addresses whether people can exchange ideas and goods with simple contracts that assure the transactions and a process of peaceful problem resolution. It is not freedom that we would wish for others in the world, but the opportunity for individuality. Freedom is the result of individuality, not individuality the result of freedom. The rest is incidental. It is the freedom to laugh at abuse of power so that others might recognize it and laugh with you until that abuse can get no traction."

"History shows centralization is a powerful force. It's easy to call for liberty but can one person make a difference to assure it?"

"You don't have a choice. You are all you have to work with."

"I mean that question seriously."

"What is at risk if we don't try? If the individual does not matter, there is no reason for the individual to do anything except rust. We don't do our best to develop skills to strengthen individuals."

"Show me."

"Now, you don't have to be an ass about it, but every 'like' used as a useless placeholder in a sentence is rust. Every poorly constructed syllogism increases entropy. At the newspaper I take every opportunity to correct malformed speech that should never have survived high school. Corrections have become so commonplace that they expect it from me, and I can't not do it."

"Why are so many remediations necessary?"

"It's more than casualness, or misunderstanding. For too large a segment of a generation of credentialed teachers, clear language has lost its importance. They don't know what they should value

or why, and just as likely, neither did their teachers. Those teachers were students who grew up in the 1980s, a cosseted generation protected from fear. The economy was improving from the 1970 Jimmy Carter years. They no longer feared the bomb because a rusting Soviet Union had imploded. That's when Jacob Bronowski, Lecturing at MIT in 1985, warned people to shoulder the load themselves and not to accept an expert's title or costume as the measure of the idea. *Magic, Science, and Civilization* advised against taking scientists, politicians, or preachers as gospel at face value."

"What do we need to understand to make this work?"

"Francis Bacon said, 'Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.' People who are not readers have less of a chance of becoming thinkers. The power of the mind requires language and the precise choice of words–'full,' 'ready,' and 'exact.' Exact language and expression represent an exact thought, although linguists raise doubts that thought can be accurately transferred to others. Nevertheless, we do the best we can. Language is inextricably intertwined with thought, and *visa versa*. When we read we exercise the mind. When we write we carefully weigh one word against a different one. I fear that subtle distinctions are learned more by chance today in schools. When we teach someone to write, we give that person the power to lift intellectual weights. When we were in school, we wrote because teachers made us write, not because we understood that we were strengthening our ability to discern. Purpose was not made clear. I was fortunate. I was one of the last students at a time when people honestly taught reading and writing.

"In *Less Than Words Can Say*, Richard Mitchell wrote, 'Many of my students seem unable to express themselves in any language whatsoever. They aren't utterly mute, of course. They can say something about the weather. And give instructions about how to get to the post office. They are able to recite numerous slogans, especially from television commercials, and the lyrics of popular songs and recent–very recent–political campaigns. They are able to read traffic signs and many billboards and even some

newspapers. They can claim certain emotions with regard to various teams and even individual athletes whose names they often know. They can spin more or less predictable reveries about the past, or the future, either in very simple concrete terms or in sentimental banalities or both. But they cannot pursue a process. They cannot say why evidence leads to a conclusion. They cannot find examples for analogies. They have never even heard of analogies. People in that condition don't think of themselves as being in that condition because they don't THINK of themselves. They honestly don't think at all.'

"That's frightening."

"There have been pivotal times across history when experience lets us synthesize a more useful form of thinking; where inconsistency, conflict, misdirection like rumples in a blanket can be shaken flat again for a time. Mitchell warns how rumpled the blanket is. Multiple Eskimo words for "snow" have discrete and perhaps lifesaving meanings that multiple ghetto English synonyms for money do not. Mitchell argues that to know a language is not enough any more than being able to wiggle your fingers is enough to make you a pianist. 'The aim of education is to make those rudimentary skills into the medium of thought.' He argues for more sophisticated literacy than mere ability to do some reading and some writing.

"Ignorance of the essential nature of language—that language is essential for thought—jeopardizes our future. Mitchell issues a warning, 'Everyone who has succeeded in learning a foreign language has come to 'think' in that language.... Now it seems that there are millions of Americans who can't even think in English. How is it with them? Do they plan, or do they merely fantasize? Do they solve problems or do they merely rummage around for a suitable slogan? Are they the people Socrates had in mind in thinking about the unexamined life that wasn't worth living? Can they examine life? People in that condition don't think of themselves as being in that condition because they don't think of themselves—they don't think at all.'

"What makes the problem so immediate?"

"Bronowski explained that the more that one learns to bend the strength of nature to personal will, the more we have to depend upon *good* will and not isolation to protect ourselves. Where previously we could use an iron bolt to protect our door, new that people are learning to master nature by learning to obey her, an iron bolt is no longer sufficient an a strong box will no longer protect our gold. Powerful weapons threaten both safety and security. My generation that saw Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* should have learned that violence could succeed. As the city of Alexandria was ransacked and burned centuries ago, an irreplaceable library of knowledge was lost. It took 1400 years to regain some of the knowledge. On the next go around, we may not have any chance to recover."

"How can we change?"

"For the first time in history we may be prepared to understand that common sense, or thoughtfulness, may be able to be taught. Well, not taught, because one seldom teaches anybody anything. More likely it is 'caught.' One of the premises of Julian Jaynes' *Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, is that, thought—our common sense—is an acquired trait, more likely caught than the result of our best efforts teaching. Good teachers set up obstacles in the path they see people likely to take. Stumbling over them, they discover for themselves wisdom worth knowing. Douglas Hofstadter, in *Gödel, Escher and Bach* gave some symbols to use to help teach people common sense. Balance. Perspective. Understanding. The future is up to you.

"Do we have enough time?"

"Time is another single word with so many meanings easily confused or easily abused. One can be oblivious to it, or one can become transfixed by it. Wittgenstein said that if you consider eternity to mean, not all time, but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. If you can put time on a shelf, say for the duration of a party, or play, that is not ignorance of time, but being judicious in its use. Still others live their life transfixed as if they must always look back in the mirror and ask 'How am I doing?' Some people look at time vertically, while others look at it horizontally."

"That makes no sense to me."

"The dynamics of time escape many people at our business. A problem comes up and they solve it and they continue, satisfied they have done their job, convinced they care about our customers. People have been trained all their lives to analyze from snapshots. If time marches along on the horizontal, a snapshot would be a vertical instantaneous slice of time. That's how students study the Newtonian physics of a ball bearing dropping under the influence of gravity.

"If we run a replacement for an ad that ran the wrong day, or to correct a typographical error, staff often presumes the problem has been solved."

"We did, didn't we?"

"That instance of the problem was solved, but the process that allowed the problem in the first place is still operational to allow another instance of the problem to occur in the future."

"Is this a big problem?"

"While news media aren't always correct, a mistake doesn't invalidate them as a source so long as they are committed to a process to become correct. Commitment to process does not come easily to generations schooled on static, Newtonian snapshots or fact-oriented curricula. People haven't the habit to think dynamically and often fight the metaphor. If you sight along time, as if it were a strip of motion picture film held out in front of you horizontally, one frame of the film—one shot—would be like a single vertical slice. Schools more often teach as if students live in a static Newtonian universe. Process is less significant as a tool to better your life than for your parents who grew up in an environment that made them more sensitive to time and their place in it."

"How so?"

"Back then, grandparents lived their senior years under the care of their children. Back on the farm, they cared for the children while the able-bodied worked the fields. Grandma in the house used to be the repository of lessons about time.

"The literature of the 1980s was often preoccupied with chronology rather than time. In 1981, Salmon Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* told a rigid chronology of Saleem Sinai, born at midnight on August 15, 1947, the moment of India's independence from England. He synthesized mythology, Disney movies, and the tradition of many previous novelists. *Satanic Verses*, followed, describing the struggle to put together lives shattered by cultural clash, migration, and change in a world where reality seems relative and fragile, and religious faith and revelation can be politically manipulated.

"Even literature used to carry the lesson. Stendhal, when he wrote *Charterhouse of Parma* shortly after 1800 transformed the sense of time in the novel, carrying it over several generations. Tolstoy followed suit shortly thereafter. But now, we live in a generation of time bigots."

"Time bigots?"

"Yes. They hold previous generations to their own standards oblivious to the march of time and experience between then and now. What is the difference between Joseph Conrad's recognition of colonial boundaries, PoCo author Chinua Achebe's 1975 criticism of Conrad's unrecognized boundaries and recognition that Achebe and Conrad do not see the boundaries of society clearly? Who is the bigot? We should celebrate those who, limited by their culture, were deserving of respect for their time. Similarly, I am humble in my own limitations, and must get out of bed tomorrow."

"Seneca said, 'What really ruins our characters is the fact that none of us looks back over his life. We think about what we are going to do, and only rarely of that, and fail to think about what we have done, yet any plans for the future are dependent on the past.' Absent a sense of history and their own place in it, yesterday happened today and tomorrow will never come. Yes, for this generation of time bigots, history begins at dawn."

"The young—not the very young, but those in their prime—recoil at their elders. They are as bigoted as any. Their 'I'm hot!' overlooks that all to soon they will be 'Not!'—unprepared to face their wrinkles and grow old gracefully.

"Time and your place in it is another golden thread of wisdom that many great thinkers have addressed throughout history. Where in the school curriculum or the state education standards that it is addressed?"

"I don't know."

"And—he says with loving respect—don't know enough to care."