

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



October 06, 2014

OPR: REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS FUTURE

This past Tuesday, California Governor Jerry Brown signed the nation's first statewide ban on single-use plastic bags in pharmacies and grocery stores. The ban, which follows the lead of more than 100 California cities and counties, goes into statewide effect next summer. Moreover, customers will have to pay at least a ten-cent fee for paper bags. In signing the legislation, the Governor said, "This bill is a step in the right direction - it reduces the torrent of plastic polluting our beaches, parks and even



the vast ocean itself." To be certain, not everyone is cheering the legislation. Some see it as just another one of "Governor Moonbeam's" meaningless gestures -- one which will accomplish little save adding yet another tax on an already overburdened middle class. [*n.b. To this very day, whenever anyone engages me in discussion about Governor Brown, two things are bound to pop up: the term "Governor Moonbeam," and at least one question about Linda Ronstadt. Give me a break; that was a lifetime ago . . .*]

Enacting legislation meant to address yet another aspect of the global crisis is vintage Jerry Brown; he has been doing it for more than four decades. Back in 1976, I took a year's leave of absence from rabbinic studies in order to work for the then 38-year

old governor in his Office of Planning and Research [OPR]. Under the extraordinarily capable leadership of the then 35-year old [Bill Press](#), our task at OPR was to serve the governor and his cabinet as primary staff for long-range planning and research. Even back then, nearly 40 years ago, we were futurists. Everyone, it seemed, carried around copies of [E.F. Schumacher's](#) *Small is Beautiful: Economics as If People Really Mattered*, and [Aldo Leopold's](#) *A Sand County Almanac* and quoted [Leopold Kohr](#). Our task was addressing such issues as land-use, global warming and sustainability, water scarcity, and both the legal and ethical rights of trees, animals and natural resources. Headquartered in the historic California Fruit Company building, OPR -- both the staff and the mission -- was, I believe unique in the annals of public service. Where else in government could one find an office stocked with religiously-trained political geeks devoted to saving the earth?



Yes, we were a fascinating group: From [Peter Detwiler](#), our Director of Research and Claudia Buckner, our in-house Project Manager and Editor to our boss, Bill Press and his deputy, the late [Deni Greene](#), we had no idea just how far ahead of the learning curve we were. Dreaming up plans, programs and legislation to help save the land, repair the environment and affect a "theology of ecology" seemed pretty damned outré back in the middle 1970s. And although we did have a basic sense that what we were doing was a wee might cutting-edge, we firmly believed that our efforts were absolutely essential if we were to have a sustainable world to bequeath to our children and grandchildren. Much of what we dreamt and discussed back then, is now beginning to emerge as part of a serious planet-wide dialogue.



As mentioned above, many of us who worked at OPR -- like Bill Press and the governor himself -- came from seminary backgrounds. We firmly believed that repairing the planet was a moral imperative steeped in our various religious traditions. We understood that the God who created our world entrusted -- and commanded -- humanity to act as stewards, and not as conquerors, of the earth. Sadly, maddeningly, over the past decade or two, the greatest impediment to seriously addressing climate change, pollution and the wanton extinction of literally thousands of species, has come largely from the ranks of fundamentalists who deny the reality of climate change in the name of "the old-time religion." These are folks who believe that the thousands of climate scientists whose research proves that the earth is fast reaching a point of no return are somehow involved in a salacious conspiracy aimed directly at the community of believers. Then too, these are the same people who believe that dinosaurs existed contemporaneously with human beings.

Let's face facts: As protectors, as stewards of the earth, we are doing a spectacularly horrible job. According to the [Center for Biological Diversity](#), we're currently experiencing the worst spate of species die-offs since the loss of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. Now, although extinction *is* a natural phenomenon, it occurs at a natural "background" rate of about one to five species per year. Scientists estimate we're now losing species at 1,000 to 10,000 times the background rate, with literally dozens going extinct every day. It could be a scary future indeed, with as many as 30 to 50 percent of all species possibly heading toward extinction by mid-century.

Unlike past mass extinctions, caused by events like asteroid strikes, volcanic eruptions, and natural climate shifts, the current crisis is almost entirely caused by us — by humans. In fact, 99 percent of currently threatened species are at risk from human activities, primarily those driving habitat loss, introduction of exotic species, and global warming. Because the rate of change in our biosphere is increasing, and because every species' extinction potentially leads to the extinction of others bound to that species in a complex ecological web, numbers of extinctions are likely to snowball in the coming decades as ecosystems -- like polar icecaps and rain forests -- begin to unravel.

We are killing the planet and permitting the Luddites to have their say -- and base it on religious scruples.

That's the bad news. The good news is that maybe . . . just maybe . . . things are beginning to change. Just the other day, Google's chairman Eric Schmidt admitted that his company had made a mistake in helping fund the politically powerful group [ALEC](#) -- the Koch Brothers led American Legislative Exchange Council -- because "the group is spreading lies about global warming and making the world a much worse place." Google's backing of ALEC was always considered weird, considering that the search-engine giant has, at the same time, invested over \$1 billion in solar and wind power projects which generate more than 2 gigawatts of power and has set a goal to eventually power its data centers with 100 percent renewable energy. I would imagine that high tech companies will follow suit.

Then too, there are many fascinating developments that have been flying beneath the radar. There are a host of new green technologies being created around the world dealing with everything from creating eco-friendly cement and effectively converting the toxic byproducts of oil refining into safe usable energy, to solar generation that is 300% more efficient than anything in use today, and techniques for actually reversing global warming. One of the most fascinating aspects of all these cutting-edge developments is that they are actually bringing people from all over the planet together. Could it be that history's greatest looming catastrophe could, in the long run, offer us the greatest hope for uniting as a planet?

Then too, there is a new, fast-growing group called the Evangelical Environmental Network, which is spreading the word that climate change is real and that those who deny it are completely off base. There is a new best-selling book in the evangelical community entitled *A Climate for Change: Global Warming Facts for Faith-Based Decisions*. Its authors, Katherin Hayhoe, a professor and director of the Climate Science Center at Texas Tech University and her husband, Andrew Farley, a professor of applied linguistics and pastor, are making an incredibly strong case for saving the earth as an article of Christian faith. It is beginning to catch on. And, they are directly taking on the climate change deniers and gently reminding them that they are woefully out-of-step with God's will. Professor Hahoe writes, "*As Christians, we believe we are to love others as we love ourselves, and God gave us this world as a gift. If a friend gave you a gift and you treated it like garbage, now what would that say about how we feel about that friend?*"

And, in a sign that more and more people are finally coming to grips with the fact that the biggest, most important issue in the world is the earth itself, a throng of humanity estimated at about 311,000 marched from New York City's Columbus Circle to Times Square and the Far West Side. The diversity of the demonstrators made for some odd juxtapositions. On West 58th Street, the minaret of an inflatable mosque bobbed next to a wooden replica of Noah's Ark the size of a school bus. Nearby, Capuchin Franciscan monks in flowing brown robes, who were in town from Rome for the march, mingled with nuns, while a group flying a pagan flag beat a drum. The next day (Sunday September 22), there were demonstrations across the globe from Paris to Papua, New Guinea. Unbelievably, this, the single greatest crisis facing the planet, could be the one thing which ultimately unites the planet.

Looking back on the work we did at OPR nearly 40 years ago, I am amazed at how far-sighted Governor Brown, Bill Press and the rest of the staff was. We understood then what is finally beginning to dawn on the rest of the planet today: that issues of war and peace, of economy and trade won't matter a fig if planet earth dies.

From where I sit and write, this remembrance is really of things future. . .

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BLAME IT ON THE VILLAINOVANS!

Back in the days of Hollywood's early adolescence, producer/director William C. deMille (being Cecil's, more gifted, less narcissistic older brother and Agnes' father) facetiously proposed the formation of a syndicate to purchase an island on which a new state should be erected, to be named "Villainova." According to the elder deMille (whose kid brother changed the spelling of the family name



to "DeMille"), the inhabitants of Villainova would be supported in luxury by a tax on Hollywood studios, which in return would receive the right to make the heavies in all their pictures "Villainovans." In this fashion they could hope to avoid the protests of foreign governments and domestic pressure groups when one of their nationals or members, fictitious or real, was portrayed on the screen in a less than favorable light.

I recently came across this long-lost chestnut while researching a new book on the history of Hollywood. My first thought was "Brilliant! Just what American politics needs . . . Villainovans . . . a universal go-to-and-blame-everything-on-'em group of sinister nogoodniks." Yes, I *am* being a bit silly and jocose here. But so too was Bill deMille; why should I be either utterly serious or totally realistic? Then again, perhaps what American politics needs is some sort of cardboard cutout; a universal target we all can point fingers and fists at, thereby permitting incumbents and challengers to deal with positions and issues, rather than what we might term "the banality of puerility."

Of course, broadly speaking, Republicans and Democrats *do* have their own versions of Villainovans; for the former its liberal Democrats; for the latter, conservative Republicans. When it comes to the banality of puerility, neither side gets a pass; both seek to make the other appear the absolute embodiment of hard-hearted, chuckle-headed ignorance. There are several problems with this, not the least of which is that neither side truly believes the eyewash they publish. Modern political stereotyping is so arch, so odious, that an ever-increasing number of Americans have chosen to simply take a pass and opt out of the system. "There's not a whit of difference between the parties," more and more claim. "All they care about is catering to the needs and wishes of their wealthy backers . . . not average citizens like me." When all candidates and office-holders do is point fingers at one another; when real, substantive debate and action are replaced by blame, the evisceration of personal reputation and acts of incivility, American politics becomes little better -- and a whole lot less entertaining -- than a third-rate reality show on cable TV.

Of course American politics have long included a significant entertainment factor. Take as but one example, the 1840 presidential race pitting the 68-year old Virginia Whig William Henry Harrison against the incumbent Democrat Martin Van Buren. The Whig campaign was replete with slogans ("Tippecanoe and Tyler too"), songs ("With Tip and Tyler/We'll bust Van's Biler/Farewell dear Van/You're not our man"), banners, placards, balls, cider barrels, and plenty of free food. The campaign's centerpiece was a gigantic fifty-by-one-hundred foot log cabin in which literally thousands of Whig partisans could listen to long-winded speeches extolling the virtues of Harrison and the Whig platform, while damning the vices, ineptitude, and reckless partisanship of Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, and the Democrats.

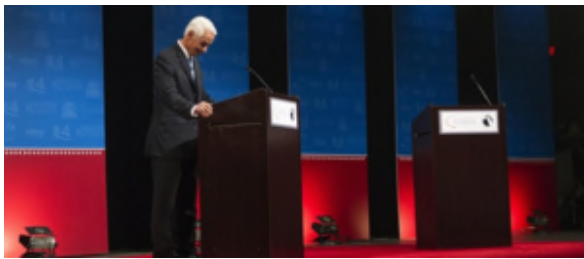


The election hinged on convincing the voting public that Van Buren -- the son of a Kinderhook, New York saloon keeper -- was an out-of-touch aristocrat, and that Harrison -- a seventh-generation Virginia slave-owning plantation owner -- was a down-to-earth man of the people. Somehow Harrison's handlers pulled it off; Old Tippecanoe easily defeated The Little Magician taking nearly 53% of the popular vote and winning 19 of the 26 states. Despite its high entertainment quotient, the campaign did manage to discuss most if not all the serious issues of the day.

Unlike today, when all we seem to learn is just how evil the other guy -- or gal -- is.

Increasingly, I get the sense that the number of people who believe *anything* they pick up through political ads or observe in televised debates is swiftly diminishing; more and more people have come to grasp the sad fact that the last thing in the world campaigns and debates seek to do is illuminate, elucidate or illustrate. Perhaps that is the point; to so frustrate and insult people as to keep any and all but the most hard-bitten partisans -- those with skin in the game -- away from the polls.

Last night's second gubernatorial debate here in Florida serves as an example of all that is worst in American politics. About 500 people attended the debate between incumbent governor Rick Scott and former governor Charlie Crist. The highlight of the evening occurred even *before* the debate commenced; Scott refused to go on stage until Crist removed a fan from inside his lectern. Once Scott was convinced to step up and act like a man -- let alone a governor -- the debate went from bad to worse. All we learned was how bad, evil, craven,



contemptible, untrustworthy and duplicitous the other guy is; of how everything wrong with Florida can be blamed on Scott's predecessor, Charlie Crist, while everything right about the Sunshine State has happened on Rick Scott's watch. Sadly it was about as illuminating as

a flashlight with a dead battery. And, it likely didn't change anyone's vote -- despite the two candidates having already dropped more than \$60 million in negative ads . . .

All across the country, in campaign after campaign candidates -- both incumbents and challengers -- are shedding darkness where there should be light, talking smack where they should be trying sincerity. There actually is a difference between the parties; mostly in what they would accomplish in a less politically puerile world. One look no further than Democratic and Republican stands on such issues as abortion, same-sex marriage, voting rights, nominations to the Federal bench, gun control, education, infrastructure, health policy, etc., to see get a sense of those fundamental differences. The problem is, these differences are rarely exposed to the clear light of day. Far too frequently, they -- and those who espouse them -- are buried under an avalanche of pitiable political grime. When this happens, we are all the losers.

I for one think William deMille had the right idea: let's blame it all on the Villainovans. Once we've got that one settled and behind us, we can hopefully move away from the banality of puerility and begin acting like adults.

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THE POLITICS OF EBOLA

Once upon a time not so very long ago, worldwide crises -- of the pestilential-natural disaster sort -- brought people and nations together in common cause. Many remember America's -- and the world's -- response to such horrific challenges as starvation in Biafra, earthquakes in Haiti and hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico. For the most part, responses were tellingly humane, reasonably swift and mostly devoid of political posturing. Ah, but that was once upon a time



which now seems so very long ago. Today, the challenge, the crisis is Ebola -- previously known as Ebola hemorrhagic fever. A deadly disease caused by infection with one of 5 Ebola virus strains, Ebola can cause disease in humans and nonhuman primates like monkeys, gorillas and chimpanzees. (N.B. One of these 5 strains - - *Reston ebolavirus* -- has caused disease only in nonhuman primates, but not in

humans). And most importantly, one can only contract Ebola virus if they have had direct contact with bodily fluids -- i.e. blood, sputum, urine or fecal material of one already infected with the virus.

This is by no means the world's first Ebola crisis. Back in 2000-2001, there was an outbreak of Ebola hemorrhagic fever in Uganda (as well as 2011, 12, and 13); 2002 saw a severe outbreak in Gabon and the Republic of the Congo; in 2008 Ebola-Reston virus was detected in pigs in the Philippines. This time around, the

number of countries in which the disease has been detected is greater than ever before; likewise, the number of infected and those who have succumbed is also far greater.

Regrettably and inextricably, the response to the current Ebola outbreak in West Africa has included a deeply and largely counter-intuitive strain of partisan political pandering. In short, many blowhards are using the current crisis as an opportunity to score political points by scaring the pants off a largely unlettered public. Where the Ebola outbreak *should* be addressed with deadly seriousness by epidemiologists, infectious disease specialists, medical ethicists and pharmacologists the world over, a growing cadre of political hacks have chosen to treat it as but one more way to skewer the current administration in the hopes of gaining more votes in the upcoming election.

Cynicism has reached a new high . . . or low.

A few recent news items highlight this enhanced cynicism:

- Speaking on Glenn Beck's radio program, Texas Representative Louie Gohmert [expressed his anger](#), accusing CDC Director Dr. Tom Frieden of claiming that the Texas nurses who contracted Ebola had violated protocol. Said America's dumbest Congressman: *"It's a shame that the CDC head, Frieden, is apparently the new commander of the Democrats' war on women nurses,"* Gohmert told Beck. *"Because, goodnight, they set them up, and then they throw them under the bus."* In reality, Dr. Frieden [called the nurses](#) "good, dedicated people" who violated protocol in part by wearing *too much* protective gear, something one obviously does with the best of intentions.
- Speaking at a pizza party at Plymouth State University, Kentucky Senator Rand Paul -- an ophthalmologist who specializes in cataract and glaucoma surgeries -- warned students *"[The Obama administration] has downplayed how transmissible [the Ebola virus] is."* In an interview with CNN this past Thursday the Senator said, *"They say it's the exchange of bodily fluids, which makes people think, 'Oh, it's like AIDS. It's very difficult to catch. If someone has Ebola at a cocktail party they're contagious and you can catch it from them . . . [The administration] should be honest about that."* Despite having earned an MD, Dr. Paul is spreading nonsense; he refuses to tell the truth that in order to contract Ebola, our hypothetical cocktail party attendee would have to first exchange bodily fluids with an infected person.

- Texas Senator Ted Cruz's Deputy Chief of Staff Nick Muzin [tweeted](#) "*Before Obamacare there had never been a confirmed case of Ebola in the United States.*" Then too, before Obamacare, there had never been anyone named Ted Cruz serving in the United States Senate . . .
- Leading conservatives, including Tennessee Rep. Marsha Blackburn and former presidential hopeful Steve Forbes have damned President Obama for nominating administration insider Ron Klain to be the new Ebola Czar. Decrying Klain as a "political hack," GOP leaders have urged the president to instead name former Senate Majority Leader (and heart transplant surgeon) Bill Frist. While Klain is undoubtedly a political insider without a track record in public health, Dr. Frist is an even worse choice: the multimillionaire GOP partisan who almost went to prison over insider trading, wrongly diagnosed Terry Schiavo and lied to the American people about the transmissibility of HIV/AIDS. (I originally wrote about Frist and his politically-motivated "diagnosis" of the brain-dead Mrs. Schiavo in a June 2005 essay entitled [Doing the Sidestep.](#))
- GOP leaders are scoring President Obama for not having a Surgeon General in place at a time of medical crisis. The position of Surgeon General has been vacant since July, 2013, when Regina Benjamin stepped down; ever since, the responsibilities have been covered by her deputy, Boris Lushniak, as acting Surgeon General. Very few people in the general public, and few in Congress, noticed or cared about this vacancy until Ebola was diagnosed in Dallas. Suddenly, it's on the national radar, with Republicans, as usual, blaming the President. Truth to tell, this past March 14 President Obama nominated Dr. Vivek Murthy as the next Surgeon General. The New England Journal of Medicine describes Dr. Murthy as "*A highly respected physician with impressive credentials who would have been an outstanding Surgeon General.*" Would have been? What happened to derail his nomination? The British born Dr. Murthy is an instructor in medicine at the Harvard Medical School and co-founder and chairman of TrialNetworks, a cloud-based Clinical Trial Optimization System for pharmaceutical and biotechnology trials that improves the quality and efficiency of clinical trials to bring new drugs to market faster and more safely. Despite possessing a sterling *c.v.*, Dr. Murthy has publicly expressed his view that 30,000 firearm deaths a year is a public health problem that warrants study and evidence-based interventions. Republicans, at the behest of the NRA, have successfully blocked a confirmation vote. And now they howl that the president refuses to nominate a Surgeon General who is acceptable . . .

- Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson has been talking up the threat of ISIS militants intentionally infecting themselves with the Ebola virus and then traveling to America. He calls it a “real and present danger.” There are a couple of problems with this -- not the least of which that spreading fear and panic is not the sign of a leader. Using Ebola as a biological weapon is well beyond the pale. Creating a biological weapon is far more difficult than using a chemical such as chlorine or manufactured chemical munitions. Contrary to how the media frequently portrays them, biological weapons are not easy to obtain, are not easy to deploy effectively and do not always cause mass casualties. With Ebola, there is a 21-day incubation period; three weeks in which ISIS wouldn't even know if terrorist A had contracted the disease. And once it was obvious that terrorist A did have Ebola, he would present with a plethora of obvious symptoms -- nausea and vomiting, raised rash, severe weight loss, and bleeding, usually from the eyes, and bruising (people near death may bleed from other orifices, such as ears, nose and rectum) -- as to be incapable of moving about furtively. He would be a walking billboard proclaiming "I HAVE EBOLA!"



Without question, the Ebola virus is a potent illness which if left unchecked, could wipe out hundreds of thousands -- if not millions -- of people. However, at this point in time, what is even worse than the actual virus are all those hacks seeking to make partisan political capital out of a human tragedy. Quit using all the scare tactics before someone comes along and places you under an involuntary psychiatric hold. . .

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