

The View From My Balcony

August 9, 2017

Edition #77

North Korea.

This morning I listened to the NPR / PRI radio program "The Takeaway". They began with a twelve minute story about North Korea which I suggest you listen to. Here is a link to the audio (scroll down to "A plea to 'Cool it' with the 'Fire and Fury'")

<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/takeaway>

During that program I learned about an academic web site (supported by Johns Hopkins) I had never heard of before that is devoted to news about and analysis of North Korea. One of the writers (Joel Wit) for the web site was interviewed on that program. Here is a link to the site: <http://www.38north.org/about/>

I am reminded of the famous scene in "Cool Hand Luke" where the Captain says "What we've got here is failure to communicate! Some men you just can't reach!"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=452XjnaHr1A>

We need to talk to North Korean leadership. It needs to be away from the media and it needs to be soon. My friend Jamie G and I joke about his fantasy conversations with Rex Tillerson (at least I think they are fantasies) and Jamie assures me Rex agrees that dialogue is the best path. But Rex's boss - our President - believes bellicose rhetoric is a better approach. It is not. Every inflammatory Trumpism is replayed within North Korea as proof that the U.S. is their mortal enemy. Perhaps dialogue would be ineffective, perhaps it would be effective. But I know for certain that in the absence of dialogue the situation will not improve. I believe our President has some capable and experienced advisors, including Kelly, Mattis and McMaster. These are men who have lived war and understand it must always be the last option, not the first threat. We have reached a defining moment. Will our President listen?

The View From My Balcony

August 14, 2017

Edition #78

Words matter. Words make a difference.

"That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. Homes have been lost, jobs shed, businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly, our schools fail too many -- and each day brings further evidence that the

ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet. These are the indicators of crisis, subject to data and statistics. Less measurable, but no less profound, is a sapping of confidence across our land; a nagging fear that America's decline is inevitable, that the next generation must lower its sights."

Barack Obama – January 20, 2009

"We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence, on many sides. On many sides. It's been going on for a long time in our country. Not Donald Trump, not Barack Obama. This has been going on for a long, long time." Donald Trump – August 12, 2017

Words matter. Words make a difference.

"I am honored and humbled to stand here where so many of America's leaders have come before me..... We have a place, all of us, in a long story, a story we continue but whose end we will not see. It is a story of a new world that became a friend and liberator of the old, the story of a slaveholding society that became a servant of freedom, the story of a power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer." George W. Bush – January 20, 2001

"I'm in Washington today to meet with my economics team to meet about trade policy and major tax cuts and reform. We are renegotiating trade deals and making them good for the American worker, and it's about time. Our economy is now strong, the stock market continues to hit record highs, unemployment is at a 16-year low and businesses are more optimistic than ever before. Companies are moving back to the United States and bringing many thousands of jobs with them. We have already created over 1 million jobs since I took office. We will be discussing economic issues in greater detail later this afternoon, but based on the events that took place over the weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia, I would like to provide the nation with an update on the ongoing federal response to the horrific attack and violence that was witnessed by everyone." Donald Trump – August 14, 2017

Words matter. Words make a difference.

"We earn our livelihood in America today in peaceful competition with people all across the Earth. Profound and powerful forces are shaking and remaking our world. And the urgent question of our time is whether we can make change our friend and not our enemy. This new world has already enriched the lives of millions of Americans who are able to compete and win in it. But when most people are working harder for less; when others cannot work at all; when the cost of health care devastates families and threatens to bankrupt our enterprises, great and small; when the fear of crime robs law-abiding citizens of their freedom; and when millions of poor children cannot even imagine the lives we are calling them to lead, we have not made change our friend." Bill Clinton – January 20, 1993

"The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed all across the world. But that is the past. And now we are looking only

to the future. We, assembled here today, are issuing a new decree to be heard in every city: from this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it's going to be only America first. America first. Every decision on trade, on taxes, immigration, foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families. We must protect our borders. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength. I will never, ever let you down. America will start winning again — winning like never before. We will bring back our jobs, our borders, our wealth, our dreams. We will build new roads, bridges, airports and highways all across the nation. We will get people off of welfare. We will follow two simple rules: buy American and hire American. We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world, but we do so with the understanding that is the right of all nations to put their own notions first.” Donald Trump – January 20, 2017

Words matter. Words make a difference.

One of America's most prominent black CEOs quit President Trump's manufacturing council today over Trump's initial failure to condemn white supremacists. Kenneth Frazier of Merck said in a statement: "America's leaders must honor our fundamental values by clearly rejecting expressions of hatred, bigotry and group supremacy." Within minutes, Trump attacked him on Twitter today, saying "Now that Ken Frazier of Merck Pharma has resigned from President's Manufacturing Council, he will have more time to LOWER RIPOFF DRUG PRICES!"

Words matter. Words make a difference.

Few of our Presidents were as oratorically gifted as John Kennedy or Franklin Roosevelt. But we look to our President to be what David Gergen has called “the chief soother” when tragedy affects all of us. We expected Ronald Reagan to rise to the occasion after the Challenger disaster..... and he did:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qa7icmqgsow&t=1s>

We expected Lyndon Johnson to rise to the occasion after the arrests of the killers of Viola Liuzzo..... and he did: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuRSj85fxyY>

And now our President is an egomaniacal narcissist who seems to view the world as if looking at a make-up mirror reflecting his face back at him. For ~6 months I have tried to be fair when assessing President Trump. I have tried to be balanced, looking for a positive to balance each negative, looking for a reasonable policy initiative to balance each one that is ill conceived. And as I write these words I have given up hope. President Trump will not rise to be the President we need. He is my President. I want him to succeed because I love my country and want us to be successful. But time after time he has disappointed me and displayed an amazing lack of knowledge and understanding of economics, leadership, legislative process, foreign policy and negotiation strategy – although he is excellent at vindictiveness. We elected him. Millions of Americans heard his “America First!” message and bought into the rhetoric. He was lucky enough to run against a Democratic nominee many people were unable to support. He convinced many voters we could turn back the clock and “Make America great again!”

We were and we are a great nation. And we have the potential to continue to be a great nation but we need a great leader..... and we do not have one. I hope our Congress and Presidential cabinet members can exert their influence and protect us from disasters during the next 3 ½ years. James Buchanan you have competition.

"Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer." John F. Kennedy

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This morning I had the privilege of leading a Foreign Policy Roundtable discussion at Harper College. 16 people participated. They also care about our country and have an interest in analyzing and discussing our policy options and decisions. We had a defined topic to discuss but I hijacked the meeting and began with this video clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KxMc_tyQBo

Aaron Copland's "Fanfare For The Common Man" is one of my favorite pieces of classical music. After we listened I said the music was dedicated to the young woman who was killed in Charlottesville Saturday. Then we shared our feelings about what happened there and together sought to understand the event and how our country, and our President, had reacted to it.

This morning both the Wall Street Journal and New York Times had powerful editorials and op-ed pieces about Charlottesville and Trump's tepid response. I am still processing all of this but I do know that identity politics is at the core of the viciousness that is increasingly dividing our country. Steve Bannon wants Republicans to move to the right. Elizabeth Warren wants Democrats to move to the left. They are both wrong. Deeply wrong. My favorite historian, Shelby Foote, said that the genius of the American people was our ability to compromise. How can we compromise when we are being told to flee to the fringes, the margins, so that the divide between us becomes a chasm?

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"Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future." John F. Kennedy

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In Edition #76 of this newsletter I wrote that Vladimir Putin's approach to foreign policy follows an important concept from Sun Tzu in "the Art of War" [i.e. "know your opponent thoroughly before you take any action"]. Recently I was reading Tom Ricks' blog "Best Defense" and he quoted Secretary of Defense (and former Marine Corps Commandant) James Mattis: "But the Marine Corps has always been more Eastern-oriented. I am much more comfortable with Sun Tzu and his approach to warfare." Sadly, Putin can **act** on his understanding while Mattis will have to **educate** his boss as to why Sun Tzu's insights are important.

The best translation of "The Art of War" was done by Thomas Cleary. You can find it on Amazon at https://www.amazon.com/Art-War-Publisher-Shambhala/dp/B004QJ8BZW/ref=sr_1_8?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1502226475&sr=1-8&keywords=the+art+of+war+and+thomas+cleary

The History Channel produced a 90-minute program about "the Art of War". You can watch the entire program on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Z4IuOHGAFU&t=4s>

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"There are risks and costs to a program of action, but they are far less than the long range risks and costs of comfortable inaction." John Kennedy

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Amy McGrath for Congress (in Kentucky)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcjG2fK7kNk>

I do not know Amy McGrath, but I know she is a Democrat and I have studied and am comfortable with her positions on important issues. I found out about her campaign (and this video) from my friend Bill D. who forwarded an e-mail to me from Vote.Vets.org.

The point in the video that caught my attention was her desire to serve her country in combat and the resistance she encountered when trying to achieve her goal along with her personal commitment to improved national health care.

Here is an article about her from NPR

<http://www.npr.org/2017/08/03/541223715/female-retired-marine-with-viral-campaign-ad-hopes-to-bridge-gap-in-democratic-p>

John Wayne was a Hollywood movie hero. Amy McGrath is a bona fide combat hero. I am sending a donation to Amy's campaign.

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"If a free society cannot help the many who are poor it cannot save the few who are rich." John Kennedy

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I have found a new source for political / foreign policy news – "The Interpreter", a twice-weekly e-newsletter published by the New York Times. Here is the link - <https://www.nytimes.com/column/the-interpreter> There is no charge for this newsletter. By the way, for those of you keeping score at home, I subscribe to the Wall Street Journal (home delivery) **AND** two NYT e-newsletters, this one and Nicholas Kristoff. The search for news from all points on the political spectrum continues and remains a critical activity.

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"Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate." John Kennedy

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Readers will remember that in the 2016 Presidential election I voted for Gary Johnson. One of the reasons I did so was that Johnson was the only candidate who identified our national debt as a critical issue and made debt reduction a major campaign plank. Johnson did not win ☹ and the debt issue has not gone away. My friend John T forwarded an e-mail to me from the Heritage Foundation (conservative think tank / activist organization). One of the sub-headlines read *It's time to stop overspending and overborrowing. Congress is running out of time to pass a budget resolution. It needs to reach a budget deal by Sept 30, about the same time it will need to reach a deal to raise the nation's borrowing limit. "Nearing \$20 trillion, and larger than annual U.S. economic product, the only responsible choice in dealing with our national debt is to pursue spending controls before raising the debt ceiling again," says Romina Boccia, Heritage's Grover M. Hermann research fellow. "It is both morally and economically wrong to continue burdening younger generations with overspending and overborrowing without first adopting spending reforms to right the fiscal course."*

I have signed up for e-mail newsletter updates from the Heritage Foundation and at some point will advise if I find their communications informative enough to be included in my "news sources" list.

One statistic is undeniable. The higher the % of net government debt to national GDP the greater the risk of fiscal calamity, including inability to honor debt payments without severe inflation. The country with the worst ratio (net government debt to national GDP) is Greece (155%). The United States is 10th (88%). Countries worse than us include Lebanon (134%), Portugal (112%) and Italy (103%). Countries better than us include Denmark (8%), Turkey (28%) and Canada (37%). The last time we had a one year balanced Federal budget was during Bill Clinton's second term, ~20 years ago. Rather than the pointless discussion about the debt ceiling we need to be discussing ways to reduce the deficit. Federal debt is real debt – the money will have to be paid. The only way to reduce this debt load is to reduce spending. We cannot tax ourselves out of debt. Perhaps some tax increases may help but it is spending reduction that is most important. Spending reduction.

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"As we express our gratitude we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them." John Kennedy

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From my collection "A Road First Traveled" – my poem Anniversary

He steadied himself with a cane.

She balanced herself with a walker.

They proceeded slowly, carefully, and as always
at exactly the same pace.

Everyone else stood quietly, patiently, respectfully.

Many tears, many memories,
more forgotten than remembered.

It was the same building, the same aisle.

New pews, new stained glass windows.

They reached the altar,

painfully turned toward each other.
He was gray, bent, fragile.
He saw a vivacious young woman with
blazing red hair and dancing green eyes.
She was dying, only a little time left.
She saw a young man in uniform with
thick black hair and a smile that illuminated her world.
They hesitantly reached out for each other,
their hands touched, clasped, steadied.
Two souls flowed, swirled, blended, melded.
One shining love filled the church.
Sixty years. Sixty seconds.
Time no longer had any meaning.
Love had all the meaning they needed.

Gary Midkiff