

In Real Life

THE DAILY WORK OF AMERICANS

A WORTHWHILE STRUGGLE

By James D. Jameson

In the course of transacting business recently in Vietnam, I was able to meet with Nguyen Co Thach, who retired two years ago as foreign minister but is still a major political and economic adviser to the government. He sat across the table from Henry Kissinger in Paris in 1973 and ran the Vietnamese foreign policy establishment from 1977 until 1993. We sat together at the government guest house across from the Metropole Hotel.

"Please tell your friends to come to Vietnam. We are ready. Our policies are favorable to investment now. We have much to accomplish and we need your help," he stated.

"Yes, I'm impressed with the opportunities. You have opened the way for foreign investment," I responded.

"I want you to know that we are still socialists. We still believe that capitalists exploit the people, but we know we need this foreign investment," he said.

His pragmatism was laudable, but my thoughts raced. Yes, Vietnam. This was what it was all about. I couldn't refrain from reacting when he paused. "But, Mr. Foreign Minister, I studied the works of Marx, Engels, and the private letters of Lenin to his family from 1922 and 1923. I have traveled across Russia and have been in Eastern Europe almost every month since 1989. Yes, we who believe in free enterprise might be accused of exploitation. Of taking some of the surplus value of labor. But you, my God! You took the full value of labor. You've left your people devastated. Poor. You've spoiled the environment. And worse still, you've killed the spirit of your people. You've taken the life out of them. I've seen it. It's a tragedy."

These words were awkward in his presence. But they were said graciously and with deference and respect to his past position.

He put his hand on my sleeve. And then this retiring, elegant man of 72 years of age just smiled. A knowing smile that my words were correct and that he couldn't respond given his position.

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A second informative set of discussions came with Le Van Cuong, a 40-year-old common citizen of Hanoi who had served in the North Vietnamese army during the war. Cuong and I talked for hours over many dinners. He was a wonderful man whose past caught him up in an awkward history—a history in which over 2 million of his fellow countrymen were killed and in which America lost over 57,000 young patriots. "We were tougher than the Americans. We were used to the jungle. We were used to death. I slept under the trees for over three years, in a hammock each night. We couldn't go home. I saw

bodies floating in the river and I would drink out of it. I caught malaria and had fevers for many months. But I could still go on... But in the end, we came back to the North and a communist society in which we had nothing. Absolutely nothing," he stated in a monologue.

"You know," I said in reply, "I often wonder about U.S. foreign policy over the years since World War II. Was it worth it? The policy of containment, of trying to stop communist expansion at each point around the globe. And Vietnam, what a tragedy for all of us. It cost so much. Lives. Money. Energy."

Cuong stopped me.

"Yes, it was worth it. It was worth it. We have a better life now, and it will get much better in the years ahead, and it's thanks to you. The Americans. You stopped communism."

I wasn't expecting this from a veteran from the North, but I knew he meant it. He felt it.

And I knew I had an answer to my question: It was worth it.

James D. Jameson operates a Southern California business that manufactures agricultural irrigation systems.

FURNISHING A HOME WITH OLD LIVES

by Mary Elizabeth Podles

Years ago a college friend went to visit an old boyfriend of mine and his new wife. She came back and reported that they had bought all new furniture upholstered in black leather, then looked at me curiously to gauge my reaction. It was relief. At one point I might have married the man myself. We fell out, though, on issues of basic outlook on life, of which his furniture-

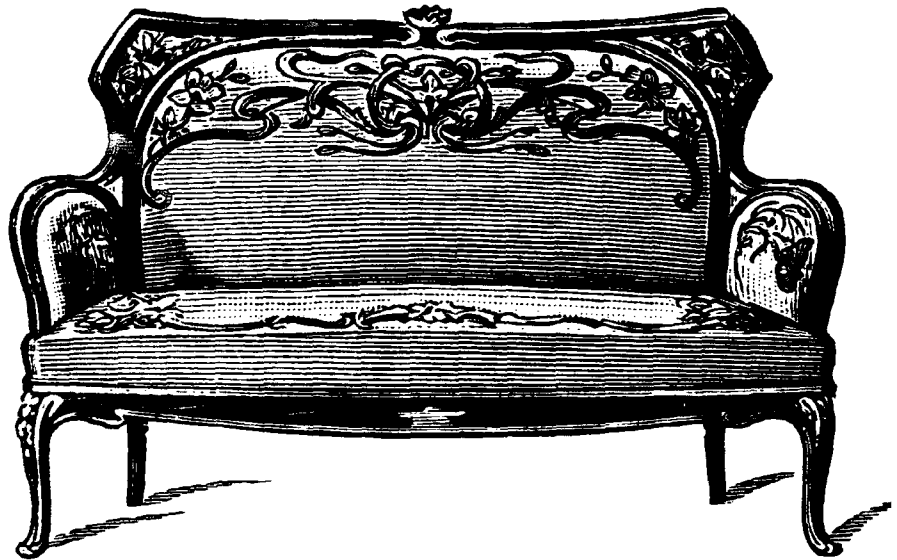
buying spree was a symptom. My idea of the acquisition of furniture is one of accretion, slow growth, and gradual buildup, like the deposit of sedimentary rock or the lengthening of stalactites.

But even the slow processes of geology have their earthquakes, upheavals, and fractures, and recently we have moved into a new house. The pressures of six children on the verge of adolescence were more than the tectonic plates of the old St. John's Road house could bear. Something had to give.

A new house is a wonderful thing. Nevertheless, it calls down upon us what as children we invoked as Piasecki's Rule: New gift, new problem. Moving the old furniture into the new, comparatively palatial house was like having the prescription for your eyeglasses changed. You saw things in sharp focus that you hadn't noticed before. The furniture which had served my husband and me well as graduate students and combined quite compatibly in a young married household might not be quite the thing for our respectable middle age.

But my prejudice against new furniture still stands. I still want furniture with a history; if not my own, then someone else's. And so we have discovered the world of the local auction houses. Apparently there exists a pool of couches, chairs, tables, paintings, prints, silver, bric-a-brac, and nameless objects that lives in north-east Baltimore and every so often changes hands, passing through the auction houses en route. It is a sort of subterranean river, and once you learn to tap into it, it makes available an amazing range of possessions for remarkably little.

Having worked at Sotheby's, I was amazed to find any paintings at all within my price range, which seldom rises into three-figure territory. No Rembrandts (though hope springs eternal), but quite a lot of unfashionable pictures altogether to my taste. For every one I find, though, I have to sift through 10,000 or so kittens and clownsapes. Religious subjects are remarkably rare; I suspect they are donated to rectories, like the lost Caravaggio that recently surfaced in Ireland. Drawings and etchings are practically given away, as no one seems to know or care much about them. (I once saw a pair of drawings by the sculptress Grace Turnbull jobbed in with a lot of flower prints



so hideous that the Good Taste Police should have declared them felonious.)

Some pictures seem to come around the cycle in a regular, if mysterious, way. One portrait of a lady, a drawing by a fe-

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male student of Sargent, caught my eye but was bought by a determined bidder set on having her. Too bad for us. But some months later, at a cut-rate auction place, she came up again, and this time we did buy her for less than we had underbid before. What had gone wrong in the interval? Maybe she was not what or who the original buyer had thought.

Portraits usually sell at high prices (instant ancestors add a touch of the Old Money look to any living room). Things once owned by famous people do too; their provenance adds to an object's monetary and conversation value. A former governor's widow's estate came up for sale quite recently, to my great surprise. I had thought that particular governor was long dead by

the time I was a child. He must, I assume, have married a much younger woman, who then lived to a ripe old age. In her honor, my husband, a native Marylander, bought the William Preston Lane Memorial Mustard Pot and Spoons.

Sometimes the salesroom is tinged with a certain melancholy. I am always sad to see family portraits sold off, as if the family had died out or its ancestry been forgotten. Once I bought my husband a photograph of a Handsome Soldier, blond, bright-eyed, and eager in his World War I uniform; why was he being sold so heartlessly and so cheap? Who was he? Were there no grandchildren my age who would like to think of him in the flower of his youth? Or did he not come back from the mud of Flanders? Later on we found one of the memorial scrolls signed by the king that were sent to the survivors of every British soldier killed in the Great War—why had that passed out of family hands?

All of this has taught me a lot about detachment. Looking over the newly assembled household, I realize that all this will pass out of my hands too, and what strikes me as decorative, poignant, or genuinely charming may make all my children gag. All this is only temporary, transitory, and some day will go up for auction, if I am lucky, as "The Property of a Lady." It is only mine in trust.

Mary Elizabeth Podles is a Baltimore housewife and retired curator of Renaissance and Baroque art at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, Maryland.

From Weapons to Widgets

CAN OUR NATIONAL LABS GO PRIVATE?

by Richard Miniter

If you want to revisit the Cold War, get on Interstate 25, a two-lane ribbon of concrete that begins in the high desert of New Mexico, cuts Colorado in two, and vanishes into the high plains of Wyoming. Along the way, America's atomic highway connects three top-flight, once top-secret, high-tech weapons labs: Los Alamos National Laboratory, Sandia National Laboratory, and the National Renewable Energy Lab. Once the first line of defense in a technological duel with the Soviet Union, the national laboratories scattered along I-25 and across the United States are now hunkered down to avoid the axes of budget cutters in Congress.

It is perhaps inadequately appreciated that the U.S. Department of Energy runs 8 major labs and 20 minor labs with a combined annual budget of \$6 billion and some 50,000 employees. Over the past 20 years, more than \$100 billion has been lavished on these facilities. The results have often been disappointing, and with the Cold War won, the labs are now searching for a new mission.

The Sandia lab in Albuquerque should be the Department of Energy's showcase for national labs taking on new missions. For more than 40 years, Sandia was managed on a non-profit basis by AT&T's Bell Laboratories, perhaps the private sector's best research and development firm. Bell Labs has a distinguished history of bringing innovations to the marketplace, and some of its corporate culture must have worn off on Sandia, which numbers among its accomplishments contribution toward the creation of the "clean room" technology used today in making computer chips, drugs, and other high-tech products. Sandia is widely believed to be the most "product oriented" of the national labs. If any of them could make it in the post-Cold War world, it would probably be Sandia.

Sandia and many of the other labs are currently waving a banner for "technology transfer"—a Washington term that is as broad as it is vague. To some, technology transfer means spinning off defense-originated gadgets to the private sector. To others, it means licensing government research breakthroughs to entrepreneurs, or serving as a research and development arm for American firms anxious to beat foreign competition. By any measure, technology transfer has so far been a failure, and there are good reasons to believe the labs will have even less success in the future.

Ever since NASA gave us Tang, government labs have been claiming that the commercial applications of their research would revolutionize America's technology base. Sandia was considered such a jewel by technology transfer enthusiasts that when AT&T decided to relinquish management of the facility, a small lobbying war erupted between competing private firms and research groups anxious to run the place for Uncle Sam. In the final negotiations, Martin Marietta, a defense contractor, eventually beat out the Battelle Institute, an independent research laboratory that helped develop the photocopying machine and inspired the formation of the Xerox Corporation. Martin Marietta promised an aggressive use of Sandia's research for commercial purposes.

Yet Sandia has stumbled on the path to the promised land. Everyone at Sandia remembers a technology transfer disaster called the GCA Corporation. GCA, which went out of business in May 1992, made water steppers, a device critical to the manufacture of computer chips. Most industrial policy gurus said water stepping technology was vital to America's competitiveness. It was a natural fit for Sandia because water steppers are related to the

clean room technology that helped build Sandia's reputation. But despite the extensive work of Sandia's engineers, GCA couldn't induce a single major chip maker to help fund the development of their machine, which was seen as unstable and unreliable. When GCA couldn't raise even \$25 million to continue their research from private sources—a paltry sum in the world of venture capital—the firm threw in the towel. GCA "was a technical success but a market failure," Sandia President Al Narath conceded to *The New York Times*.

The case for giving the national labs a new mission is spelled out in the Department of Energy's new report *Success Stories: The Energy Mission and the Marketplace*. The report cites a large number of examples, from energy efficient window coatings to oil recovery technology, but the value of these innovations is hard to estimate. In many cases, the report concedes, most of the credit for bringing a particular innovation to market goes to people outside the government. And in measuring the Energy Department's research and development costs against the total sales of a complete product that incorporates that technology as one of its features, the report often overestimates paybacks. Besides, even if the accounting were correct, it is hard to argue that the government should conduct science to enrich individual citizens or companies.

The Energy Department report concedes that "many of the bold experiments in energy demonstration projects of the late 1970s...are now seen in hindsight as having been too ambitious." The report lists a few: "synthetic fuels, the Clinch River Breeder Reactor, magnetohydrodynamics, and the Stirling Automobile Engine." What the report fails to mention is that at the time each of these projects