



*Cook and his men (above) went ashore to kidnap a chief as hostage for return of the stolen boat. A sailor shot and killed a leading chief. In the ensuing battle, many sailors and Hawaiians were slain. Cook was stabbed and killed as he and his men were fleeing to their ships off shore.*

Calligraphy/Tom Greensfelder

# Another Frontier Another Tyranny

WILLIAM APPLEMAN WILLIAMS

ONE OF MY GREAT UNCLES first shipped aboard, and later navigated, four-masted clipper ships around Cape Horn to China. It was an exhausting and dangerous way to earn a living; and in the end he fell victim to the terrors of the cold, the constant immersion in salt water, the lack of sleep, and the miserable food. He survived the last years of his life encased in a specially designed contraption that somehow maintained the circulation in his legs. He passed most of his time building an incredibly detailed model of his favorite clipper, and with great patience taught me how to handcraft such dreams.

He also enjoyed having a captive audience for his generally mordant aphorisms. One of his jaunty blasphemies seems appropriate to our contemporary predicament: "Americans have never learned how to distinguish between the two meanings of *good*." He meant, of course, the difference between *good* as the morally or aesthetically admirable, and *good* as no more than the pragmatically effective. I thought it was at least possible for those meanings to converge, and hence asked him what he meant. "Well, Billy, sometimes they do, but more often they don't and you have to make a choice. We had a few good voyages, but most of my beating around the Horn was bad: bad for the ship, bad for the crew, and bad for me—and probably bad for the Chinks. But the owners considered all of them good. They banked the profits of our deaths."

In that respect, at any rate, the world has not changed very much from the age of the clippers unto the present era of the supertankers. After many years of struggling to become as good a historian as he was a seaman, it seems clear to me that we Americans have a very strong propensity for mislaying the meaning and purpose of life even as we stuff our computer banks with every incidental fact about our existence.

Our favorite remark about ourselves, uttered constantly and with great pride, is that we are healthily pragmatic rather than sickly philosophical. I would suggest instead that we have pursued our basic philosophy with an almost fanatic

determination. We are very probably the most conservative people of recent history. We have concentrated our great intelligence and energy on the pragmatic task of implementing our original outlook—hence on denying and resisting change—no matter how far the world has turned. Our philosophy, view of the world, *Weltanschauung*—call it what you will—can be encapsulated in two words: *individualism* and the *frontier*. We have perpetually sought to honor and realize our individualism by penetrating ever more frontiers. As a result, we now entrust ever more of our lives to corporations and bureaucracies.

I have labored as a historian to reconstruct and understand that process, and to explore its consequences. But I have discovered, during the past three years, that I largely missed an important part of the story. I neglected the way in which we Americans, even as we were penetrating and conquering a continent, viewed the sea as a frontier in reserve—as a fall-forward position after we had gobbled up the land. A kind of holding tank for change. Thomas Jefferson, for example, concluded that the far edge of the Gulf

Stream was our "natural" boundary to the east. And he, along with many others, viewed our westward territorial expansion as much as a means to moving into Asia as the realization of the democratic dream.

I became fascinated by those and similar star sights during my nights in the archives, and my subsequent research ultimately carried me to the contemporary American conception of the sea as a frontier. One key figure in the recent phase of the process said it all in this remark about the ocean: "this vast, rich frontier stretching out on all sides." Reading that, one can only smile at the limited vision of Horace Greely saying no more than "Go West young man—go West." I want to review that progression and raise some questions about its implications.

## II

I was educated at the University of Wisconsin, as well as at the U.S. Naval Academy, in the traditional view that The Discovery of the Sea was a daring and majestic enterprise initiated by the Portuguese, rationalized by the British, and carried through to its magnificent climax by Cap-

tain Alfred Thayer Mahan and other Americans. But I changed my mind in the process of doing some history of the ocean cultures. (One *does* history, not at all incidentally, in the same way that one does biology or mathematics or oceanography—or even a corporation.) I became aware that the traditional Western European view of the discovery of the sea has about as much relationship to the truth as many of our other fantasies about space and technology.

The Arabs (whom even now we think of as dirty, raunchy desert rats) had better ships and sails than either the Phoenicians, Greeks or Romans. The Chinese (whom even now we view as slant-eyed creatures of night soil) had more sophisticated ships, sails, compasses, and center rudders than the Arabs. We still call their ships junks; but those junks made seven voyages (carrying as many as 37,000 people) to eastern Africa before the Portuguese managed to inch their way into the Indian Ocean. And it seems almost certain that the Chinese reached Australia and the western shores of Central and South America.

Off to the southeast-by-east of the Chinese live the Pacific peoples. They roamed that vast sea as if it was an interconnected network of lakes (much like Wisconsin or Minnesota) long centuries before James Cook sailed his way into every stamp collection in the world. That is a friendly joke, not a put-down. Cook is a central figure in the story precisely because he stood in *awe* of their ships and navigators, and of *their* sense of awe of the sea, and because he knew what was going to happen to all of those sea cultures. He did not entertain any romantic fantasies about them, but he did respect their wisdom about life and the ocean.

We will return to Cook, but first we must tip our computers to the Arabs, the Chinese, and the Pacific peoples for their prior discovery of the ocean space. It is even more revealing to examine the ways in which these cultures dealt with their technological successes. The Arabs held the sea in awe; accepted, honored, and worked with its power; and became neither colonial nor imperial traders. They hustled sharp bargains, to be sure, but they



did not subvert the existing cultures of the Indian Ocean.

The Chinese, sailing north and east, and south and west, observed and contemplated the new cultures they encountered and went home to break-up their great fleets. A remarkable story: people confident enough in their own culture to say NO to overseas empire. The Pacific Islanders accepted the sea as a way of life and honored their navigators—those who know the way—beyond their titular chieftains.

All that changes after we Western Europeans discovered the sea. The Portuguese embarked upon one of the bloodiest imperial campaigns known to history against the Arabs and everyone else from the Red Sea to Malacca. The Dutch then joined the orgy, followed as soon as possible by others. As for sailing west rather than east, the Spanish, Portuguese, English—and others—proved that they were perfectly non-discriminating in their carnage. They were true believers in the doctrine of equal rights for all non-Europeans to enjoy death, slavery, or other forms of subjugation.

It is customary to explain it all as a mania for God and Gold. Also convenient. But unsatisfactory. It is more helpful to return to Cook, and to our persistent fascination with the man. It is strange how we cannot leave him alone: more than a bit like Charlie Chaplin, or George Washington, or Thomas Jefferson, or Abraham Lincoln.

### III

When I was recently in Australia, I made several visits to Cook's childhood home. I was first intrigued by it having been removed, brick by brick, from its original site in England and then reconstructed near a pond in one of Melbourne's magnificent parks. I came to think of it as the colonial's revenge, and that set me to musing that the key to understanding Australia is to view it as the best and the worst of imperialism. But that is another essay, and here I want to explore the way that our involvement with Cook reveals our progressive loss of awe for the sea.

Cook was the son of a lower class farmer. You feel that in the home: almost more space for the animals than for the people. There is a visceral sense of caring in the architecture of that home, and Cook took that to sea. He led by example, and his concern for his men and ships is justifiably a legend. He persuaded his crews to eat sauerkraut to prevent scurvy, for example, by having them observe his officers ingest the stuff. He also honored his commitment to the acquisition of knowledge (today very arbitrarily and mistakenly known as science and technology), and concerned himself with its proper uses.

For all those reasons, we are perplexed—and more, *engaged*—by his death. Here is this remarkable man dying in a pointless confrontation on the beach with those who honor him as a god. I think that is why we put him on stamps and salute him in other ways. Once we admit the possibility, even the probability, that he died because he honored our primary values, then *our* fat is in *our* fire. For Cook understood that we western Europeans were destroying the sea even as we discovered it. He knew it in his soul, as well as in his bones and mind. His log is full of that knowing expressed in language as sophisticated as his set of sail.

That knowing generated a visceral tension within Cook that mirrored the same conflict within our culture. He respected the people he discovered, yet he was asserting a concept of life that demanded acceptance—and the acceptance meant death to the others. The final confrontation developed out of the theft by the Hawaiians of a boat from Cook's ship. He had come to understand, however, that stealing was a sincere form of flattery and respect. And his journals are full of his awe for the ships, seamanship, and character of the Pacific peoples. He had handled other such episodes with aplomb.

So we begin, finally to come down on it: Cook ultimately personified our Western European conception of discovery as penetration, conquest, and possession rather than awe. Let us imagine an alternate confrontation. The boat is stolen and Cook goes ashore alone and asks to

speak to the revered Hawaiian navigator, an equal he knows and with whom he has a warm personal relationship.

*Cook:* I am flattered by you wanting our little boat, so lost upon the sea as compared with your great canoes.

*Navigator:* We wish to honor and learn from you.

*Cook:* Thank you, Navigator. You do honor us. But we need to learn from you.

*Navigator:* Learn from *us*?!? That cannot be! You sail many seas further than we, and in larger ships with huge sails. You cannot learn from us.

*Cook:* But it is true. It takes many men to shape and set our sails. Even worse, they are difficult to control, and sometimes we fail. In those times we need good boats. I ask you to loan us one of your great canoes, and teach us how to use it, in return for our little boat. We need to learn from you.

*Navigator:* It is done. We will begin tomorrow.

*Cook:* Thank you, Navigator.

Cook returns to his mighty ship of much cloth and later sails home to glory and a warm bed. Along with a technological breakthrough that two centuries later became known as a catamaran.

### IV

Now there is the question: why did Cook, despite his remarkable character, equate success with possession of property? Cook was unquestionably a man of great humanity and awe in the face of the sea and other cultures. Yet he finally proved incapable of breaking free of our Western European equation that holds that discovery is defined by penetration, conquest, possession and exploitation: that knowing comes down to owning.

We Americans refined that crude equation into the sophisticated frontier thesis of progress, welfare and democracy. We did it very early and with considerable subtlety. The frontier became our way of life long before our revolution, and we formalized and institutionalized it in the Constitution. Yet the frontier as a way of life is inherently empire as a way of life. The logic is implacable: if we cannot have more then we cannot have progress, welfare, or democracy.

Just as there are intellectuals tucked away inside corporations as well as surviving in universities, so there are poets in history as well as in literature or oceanography. Frederick Jackson Turner was such a poet. He recognized how the frontier—perpetual expansion—had in truth underwritten our Western European definitions (and practices) of welfare, democracy and progress. But he also perceived that such expansion was in truth “a gate of escape” from reality.

Therein lies the key to the relationship between the sea, technology and space. If we view the sea as merely another space (a new frontier) to be penetrated, conquered, and possessed with technology, then we will escape from the reality of awe only to embrace our narcissist ego. We can survive only if we recognize and honor the necessity of awe.

Technology and space are means to realizing dreams. If we lose the awe, either for the ocean or for people, then we lose the dream. And, tattered, bloodied, and stuffed in the closet though it is, the dream is about all that is left of America.

If my great uncle were alive, he would remind me of supertankers stricken with technological diarrhea spilling death in the ocean, on the beaches, and into the lives of countless people. Then he would say: “Now, Billy, do you understand what I mean about Americans never having learned how to distinguish between the two meanings of good?”

All I could reply is that I still think they can converge and handcraft the dream. On the other hand, perhaps we simply do not give a damn for dreams. Maybe we prefer to bank the profits from the death of awe. If that is true, then I hope I die of natural causes before the account is balanced.

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Auckland Star

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# IN THESE TIMES

Editorial



"HERE'S MY GUARANTEE YOU RENTERS WILL BENEFIT FROM PROPOSITION 13."

## Jarvis-Gann smashes the state

While many on the left talk about "smashing the state," California right-wingers with considerable mass support are doing something about it. Not by barricades in the streets but by aiming ballots at the power of the purse. The intent of the Jarvis-Gann property tax limitation initiative to be submitted as Proposition 13 to California voters June 6 is to dismantle large sectors of the state apparatus by limiting the tax power and forcing cutbacks on government spending, services, and employment. (See story, page 3.)

It would be a mistake to view Proposition 13 as simply a "right-wing" issue. In addressing itself to lowering taxes and raising income, it involves a popular issue on which the right has adroitly cashed in.

For the left, the Jarvis initiative presents endless ironies, not the least of which involve seeing the right make political hay out of issues the left has long been raising but without anything like the right's boldness and current success.

The left has argued again and again the regressive nature of the property tax.

It has emphasized the inequalities, as between richer and poorer communities, resulting from substantial funding of essential services from that tax.

It has pointed to the fact that tenants (accounting for over half of California's population) in effect pay landlord's and utilities' property taxes through the rents and rates they pay, just as they pay other business taxes through prices.

The left has attacked private speculation and "development" schemes that

drive up land and real estate prices (hence property taxes) and squeeze out small farmers and homeowners.

The left has drawn attention to the tax exempt income accruing to banks and insurance companies holding municipal and "redevelopment" bonds, funded substantially by property taxes.

It has pointed to corporate aversion to reducing the property tax for fear of seeing bond values decline and taxes shifted to levies on the income of corporations and higher-income individuals.

The left has been first in raising all these issues, but now watches flat-footed as the right picks them up, runs away with popular support and scores big. But perhaps the supreme irony is that after years of hard work in building an anti-corporate coalition in the movement for Economic Democracy, the California left finds itself aligned with the corporate and liberal political establishments in an eleventh hour effort to defeat the Jarvis initiative.

The left, like most of the people, finds itself caught between the right, which promises lower taxes through cutting back on public services essential to working people, especially the poorest, and the corporate-liberals, who promise to maintain these services but only through rising taxes and eroding working class incomes.

The Jarvis initiative brings home the urgency of the left's formulating a distinctive program of its own that can combine the quest for greater democracy with effective measures for reducing taxes and

stabilizing or improving the real income of the majority.

Short of the commitment to building a popular movement for socialism—public enterprise and social control over the price and investment system—there can be no such distinctive left program.

The crushing burden of the property tax on people with low, moderate or fixed incomes comes not from the tax rate itself but from the rising values dictated by the workings of the private market, which raises the tax bill whatever the rate.

Maintaining and improving essential services, and the salaries and wages involved in delivering them, require public revenues. But as long as private interests own virtually all productive and profitable enterprise, the revenues must come from taxes. If the attempt is made to shift the tax burden to the corporations and the rich, they will either pass the taxes on in higher prices or take their capital elsewhere. The result must be a mix of rising prices, further income erosion, unemployment, and lower public revenues.

The left can and does match the right in having the courage of its convictions, but more than the right it must have the courage to face up to the implications of its convictions. As long as the left shrinks from explicit advocacy of and organizing around a socialist alternative addressed to such issues of immediate concern to the people like taxes and prices, it will, as the Jarvis initiative demonstrates, remain outflanked by the right and co-opted by corporate power.

## Ferency takes dilemma by the horns

The Michigan gubernatorial candidacy of Zoltan Ferency offers an example of the left facing the dilemma so sharply delineated in California and taking it by the horns instead of sitting on them. (See Inside Story, page 2). Though the California tax initiative is getting more attention, the Michigan contest may be of equal or greater significance for the nation's political future.

A former chair of the Michigan Democratic party, and third party (Human Rights) gubernatorial candidate in 1974, Ferency is running in the Democratic primary as a declared democratic socialist.

He is combining proposals on such issues as taxes, health care, education, the environment, women's rights, and jobs with an "emphasis and a new reliance on public enterprise to create jobs and economic equity." (From his campaign brochure)

In calling for shifting from the property tax to graduated income and capital gains taxes to fund education and other public services, Ferency is explicitly campaigning on the idea that to "rely on private corporate enterprise to save and create jobs in Michigan, we will necessarily be competing with states and nations with lower wage scales, fewer fringe benefits, lower taxes and unorganized work forces ... In that kind of contest under those rules, Michigan workers, employed or not, are bound to lose."

Ferency is advocating public enterprise, including a public bank to "stimulate and encourage new industries" in both the public and private sectors, as the way of guaranteeing "jobs that will be permanently located in Michigan."

In so doing, he is directly addressing people's realistic fears of capital flight and a reduced tax base incited by proposals for taxing the rich without an alternative plan for maintaining investment, employment, and public revenues. His campaign offers not just a protest against the glaring inequities of the capitalist economy but positive proposals for an alternative to it.

In effect, the Ferency campaign is based on the assumption that the American people are tired of being patronized and will respond to an appeal to their intelligence, maturity and good sense. It assumes that they will respect those who candidly acknowledge that if we are to put an end to inevitable—and unwanted—effects of the corporate system, we must be prepared to choose a new system or continue to accept the consequences. Ferency's campaign also assumes that Americans will not be frightened by a label from confronting such a choice.

On the contrary, his campaign literature invites the people of Michigan to elect the state's "first democratic-socialist governor." He gives them reason to do so with his specific programs tied candidly into affirming their implications for changing the system in general. As his campaign slogan goes, "Ferency, for a change." Win or lose, Ferency's candidacy is a change, in American politics and the politics of the American left. ■

For more information about the Ferency campaign, or to contribute to the campaign fund, address the Ferency Campaign Committee, P.O. Box 20, East Lansing, MI 48823.