TOWER TALK

Volume IV, No. 2
February 2018 Edition

Trusted Public Intellects: Are There Any Left?

James W. Guthrie

Periodically our nation has been troubled by deep domestic discord and a lack of comity. The American Revolution triggered divisions, as did slavery, entry into World Wars I and II, and Vietnam.

Today we live in another such disconcerting era. Elected leaders routinely rebuke and trivialize each other. Toxicity permeates public discourse. Entertainers are vulgar. Families and friends, even entire communities, divide over political views. We are devoid of a national consensus regarding political priorities, public values, and humor.

Repair of the nation's civic and cultural fabric has been facilitated historically by contributions from credible and persuasive pamphleteers and philosophers concerned with public policy, politics, governance, and civic values; these "public intellects" have been crucial to our nation's survival.

We have benefited from the contributions of individuals such as Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Paine, James Madison, and Benjamin Rush. Abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, Henry Ward Beecher, and Harriet Tubman shaped public opinion in the Civil War Era.

In modern times, we have been enlightened by published works and public statements of individuals such as Martin Luther King, George Will, Robert Bellah, Susan Sontag, William F. Buckley Jr., and John Kenneth Galbraith,

Humorists, such as Mark Twain, Will Rogers, and Art Buchwald, were capable of making us laugh at ourselves, without continually dropping the "F Bomb" or morbidly displaying a decapitated human skull. Remember Kathy Griffin?

Where are public intellects today? Is there anyone possessed with the capacity to truly inspire, heal, or inform?

It is difficult to identify contemporary figures who are influential regarding public policy. There are Hollywood and TV celebrities who, while living comfortably in a personal bubble of luxury and who have virtually no scholarly or civic credentials, somehow believe their opinions are important to us, even when they are not. Who will ever forget a bumbling and inarticulate Robert de Niro unable to use anything but four-letter words to criticize Trump or Jaime Lee Curtis blaming the President for the 38-minute false Hawaiian missile scare.

Policy, politics, and entertainment have become so intensely polarized that one can identify conservative, liberal, and vegetarian columnists and pundits, but it is hard to name anyone sufficiently nonpartisan or civic-minded to rise above being petty and earn the overall public trust. When one does encounter such an individual, for example, Charlie Rose, past predatory behavior and tawdry acts erode their legitimacy.

Even major-league TV newscasters are devoid of credibility. Once there were towering anchors and artful interviewers such as Walter Cronkite, Jim Lehrer, and Robin McNeill. Ever since Dan Rather was defrocked over an issue involving George W. Bush's military service, anchors have lost their credibility.

Rachel Maddow of MSNBC, Laura Ingraham or Sean Hannity of Fox, and Don Lemon of CNN are transparent and sometimes strident regarding their partisan biases. Even PBS' Judy Woodruff is suspect and News Hour regular, David Brooks, seems to know less and less about more and more.

The most watched of all, David Muir of ABC, is such a lightweight that one wonders how he holds his job. (Mark Shields of PBS is a refreshing exception. He is true to his Democratic Party roots and is almost always well informed. Matt Drudge of The Drudge Report is a conservative, but similarly well-grounded in fact.)

Oprah Winfrey has public visibility, is known to be thoughtful and generous, and engenders a large measure of public trust. She has even been mentioned as a Democratic Party Presidential candidate. However, one cannot imagine that Oprah will give up her profitable media and advertising niche for two years of political campaigning.

So-called "social media," Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter, are a large part of the problem. These media celebrate the trivial and punish serious thought. Here the English language is butchered at will, cryptic contractions such as LOL are rewarded, and short hand emojis are employed because they save words.

Thus, to whom can we turn for wisdom and guidance through this troubled epoch? It would be rewarding to hear David McCullough and other historians of stature, e.g., Walter Isaacson, and Doris Kearns Goodwin, reflect upon comparable historical periods when glitz and trivia trumped rationality. Maybe the best of our past might reveal a means for overcoming the worst of our present.

Coffee: Good or Bad For You?

Mel Cheitlin

Daily life is full of many ordinary things that in the long run may be beneficial or harmful to our health. At the end of our lives, we still may not be fully aware of all the factors that contributed to our present condition.

In an earlier article, I described the benefits of eating chocolate. How about drinking coffee? Is there evidence of either the benefits for or the dangers of consuming coffee?

A recent article in the British Medical Journal (http://www.bmj.com/content/359/bmj.j5024) attempts to provide an answer. The article reports of an extensive analysis of multiple observational and interventional studies of coffee consumption and health outcomes involving thousands of subjects. It is a meta-study that correlates the combined data from multiple studies into a single set of results.

Higher coffee consumption, when compared with lower or no consumption, was most often associated with benefit rather than harm for a variety of health outcomes. The largest relative risk reduction was at 3 to 4 cups a day vs none. There was a 17% reduction in all-cause mortality during a given period. Likewise, there was a 19% reduction in heart disease mortality. High vs low coffee consumption was associated with an 18% reduction in the risk of incident cancer, a lower risk of several specific cancers, and neurologic and liver conditions, including Parkinsonism and Alzheimer's disease.

Studies indicating harmful effects were largely nullified by adequately adjusting for smoking. There was an association between coffee consumption and an increase of 14% fractures in women.

What may account for the multiplicity of benefits found in this meta-study? Roasted coffee is a complex mixture of over a thousand compounds that have potentially therapeutic benefits. These include anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory, and anti-cancer effects that provide a possible basis for the study's good news.

So after eating your caloric dessert, have a cup, or even three or four, of coffee.

Rating Trump's Initial Year

James Guthrie

The February 2017 Tower Talk provided a baseline of selected economic and civic indicators. A year later, most economic measures are higher, the Stock Market being wildly so. Citizen optimism and happiness are up and crime is estimated to be down.

Regardless, the President's approval rating is noticeably lower than when he took office a year ago.

Presidential Performance Proxies†		
Metric	2016	2017
GDP	2.2%	2.6%
Dow	20K	26K
Unemployment	4.7%	4.1%
Trade Balance	($45B)	($49B)
Average Hourly Wage	$26.00	$26.63
Small Business Optimism	95	105
Consumer Confidence	87	122
Jobs created	2.2M	2.1M
Crime*	2848K*	—
Approval Rating	45%	38%
Happiness	#15	#11
*2016 data. Final 2017 not yet available		

† Cause or coincidence is left to the reader to decide.

A Trip to the Middle East

Anne M. Turner

For Gustavo Serena and his partner Alan Kates, their recent trip to the Middle East turned out to include a two-day voyage down the Suez Canal and skiing in a Dubai shopping mall. According to Gustavo, the whole trip was interesting, especially since the price was reasonable.

Their adventure started in Athens where they boarded the 690-passenger Azamara Journey. At almost 600 feet in length, this medium-size cruise ship has the usual assortment of restaurants, bars, and activities that passengers have come to expect including cocktail receptions for single and LGBT travelers.

After their first stop at the always interesting Greek island of Crete, the ship continued across the Mediterranean Sea to the Suez Canal. Gustavo reports that, unlike the way it was depicted in the film Lawrence of Arabia, there is now industrial development along the Canal, including three large port cities that generate tanker traffic. Whereas the Panama Canal looks like a lake in a jungle, the Suez Canal looks like a river in the desert. Side trips from the cruise in Egypt included an overnight stop in Saqqara, a visit to the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens in Luxor, and a very pleasant sailboat ride on the Nile River. "The scale in Egypt is enormous and unbelievable," said Gustavo. "It isn't tall buildings so much as massive temples and carefully hidden, large, and superbly decorated necropolises."

After re-boarding their ship in the Gulf of Suez, they sailed on to the Jordanian port of Aqaba. From here they visited ruins at Petra. This was followed by four days on the Red Sea, including surprising security rules. At sundown, every window covering in every cabin and all public spaces were drawn so that lights from the ship would not be visible to potential marauders.

The ship stopped in Salalah and Muscat in the Sultanate of Oman-both very green, impeccably clean, and filled with ex-patriots doing service-related jobs. All Omani citizens, including women, are provided free, government-sponsored health care and education and benefit from a desalination-based fresh water system. The current Sultan of Oman has been in office for forty-seven years. He has used the Sultanate's substantial oil revenues to provide an enlightened, albeit authoritarian, government.

Then, after another day of sailing, the cruise ended at Dubai, one of the United Arab Emirates. Dubai receives less than seven percent of its state income from oil. The other major sources are financial services and shopping. Some people compare Dubai to Las Vegas, but Gustavo thinks they are quite different. No casinos or other forms of gambling can be found in Dubai. The same is true for semi-nude showgirls. It is both a financial center and a tourist center offering amazing shopping for those who like to go to malls: high end jewelers from all over the world, leading international designer boutiques, extraordinary world-famous confectionery stores, and all the latest in personal electronics. Huge movie theaters show the latest releases.

There's even an indoor ski resort that Alan availed himself of. All the necessary equipment was rented, except for gloves, which had to be purchased. After he skiing for two hours, his hands were nearly frozen, his clothes were covered in snow, and he was very cold. It was 82°F outside!

According to Gustavo, Dubai is green, courtesy of a desalinization system, and has immaculate public restrooms. He said that visiting the world's tallest building, the 117-story high Burj Khalifa, was a rip-off. The viewing floor is about the same height as the former World Trade Center in New York. To go up to a higher level, you had to pay an additional $100 per person, which was not worth it. To make matters worse, a significant portion of the top of the building is not accessible for viewing. Gustavo continued that Dubai is full of ex-patriots, who are valued for their English-speaking skills, and are limited to two-year stays. Tourists also come, not only to shop, but for the beaches, which are beautiful.

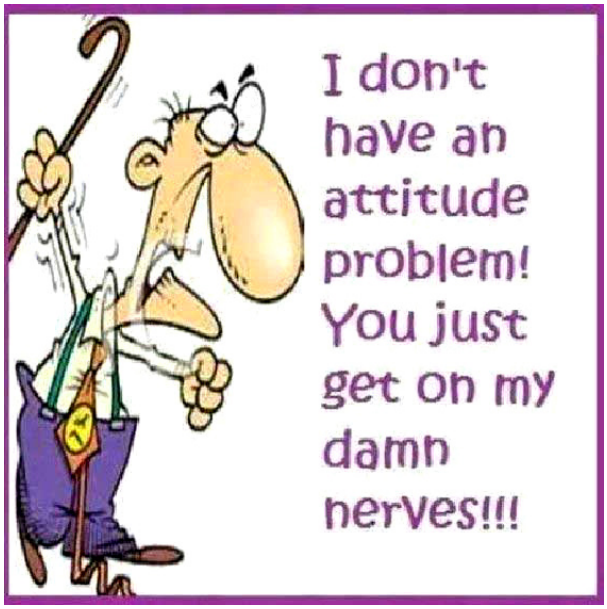
I asked Gustavo how it felt to be a gay couple in that part of the world. He replied, "For most visitors, it seems to be a don't ask, don't tell situation. We had no problems." The Sultan of

Oman may be a good example of this. Many years ago, he was married to a woman briefly, then divorced. He has never remarried and is never seen with women. Is it that he isn't attracted to women? Nobody seems to talk about it.

Entré Nous

Sugar Caen

Austin and Van Ness (SFT #1501) are doing their usual morning coffee, newspapers, and banter. Let's listen.



Aus: Your hero, Trump, has been in office a year. Are you happy?

Van: What's for lunch today?

Aus: Don't know what's for lunch, but why are you avoiding my question?

Van: It wasn't a question. You are baiting me. You know what I think of Trump, and I am trying not to argue.

Aus: I genuinely want your opinion. What do you think of Trump's first year?

Van: I'm not happy. I am ecstatic. He has accomplished much more than I ever expected. He's better than Reagan.

Aus: Really! I knew you were favorable, but I did not realize you were ecstatic. Given his low public approval ratings, you certainly are an outlier.

Van: What's not to be happy about? Stocks are up 44%. Unemployment is approaching record lows. Black Americans are finding jobs. Consumer and business confidence is way up.

Aus: He lost big on Obamacare, and he has yet to solve immigration. When do we get the vaunted infrastructure bill?

Van: Tax reform, undoing Obama regulations, and a magnificent Supreme Court appointment are big deals. All else you mention probably will come in 2018. He would have accomplished even more but for distractions such as phony Russian collusion charges.

Aus: I will give you tax reform. However, how do you put up with his boorish behavior, flip-flopping on issues, and never-ending incivilities?

Van: I concede that he does not act like past presidents. I realize that you and many others wish he would avoid tweeting and acting impulsively.

Aus: What about calling Haiti a shit hole?

Van: When are you next going to Haiti? That's what I thought. You fault him for being honest!

Aus: I do not think a President should swear in public. He should have his mouth washed out with soap.

Van: Being nice, being polite, being "Presidential," gets you nothing. No one was nicer than George W. Bush. The media treated him terribly. I say, for Trump, go for it. You are a New Yorker and that's how New Yorker's act. Get it?

Aus: OK hard head. We will see after the 2018 elections, won't we?

Van: If the economy keeps cooking, Republicans will lose a few House seats, but I'm willing to place a bet now that they retain control of both houses.

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