TOWER TALK

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HAPPY JULY 4TH

Review & Preview

This issue concentrates on politics, beginning with a Fourth of July essay on the paucity of modern-day leaders, a review of the June 26-27 Democratic Party Presidential Candidates' Debate, followed by a polemic on the deficiencies of San Francisco local politics, and a Paul Sedway comparison of San Francisco and New York City. Also, happily, Austin and Van Ness have returned from a couples' compatibility counseling cruise only, regrettably, to fall back into their pattern of never-ending bickering, in this instance, bickering about SFT politics.

Politics on a Broad Screen

James W. Guthrie

Twelve score and four years ago, the American Revolutionary War provoked widespread civic discord and economic disruption throughout the colonies. A rag tag volunteer revolutionary army eventually prevailed over England, drawing heavily upon the leadership of George Washington.

Today's world also seems perilous. Our contemporary body politic is badly divided and civil discourse regarding politics and policy issues is difficult. Immigration, abortion rights, government spending, international trade, health care, defense priorities, the national debt, and an extensive list of other issues often evoke strong feelings. These rifts divide even families and friends.

So-called "social media," electronic platforms (that are emerging as remarkably anti-social) amplify much of our nation's discord. Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and on and on they go, each offering a virtually cost-free bully pulpit from which to spew invective and falsehoods with little personal accountability or moral concern for the societal harm or individual psychological distress they can incite.

Indeed, the new electronic communication avenues are most effective in attracting attention if an author adopts an extreme position so as to distinguish one's self from the herd. Few want to be characterized as centrists. For example, one current Presidential candidate's route to fifteen minutes of political fame is to recommend that convicted criminals be permitted to vote. What a good idea! Bernie Madoff could vote again.

To combat this seeming social stress and despair, there are among us those seeking a heroic leader, another Washington. Sadly, there appears to be no hero of such proportions on today's horizon. Rather than lament the limited number of acceptable current American political heroes, here is a contrary view.

Counter intuitively, the absence of heroes might reflect a healthy Republic. Living heroes are often manufactured from spontaneous waves of popular feeling. They seldom emerge from thoughtful undercurrents. Nations with living heroes do not routinely prosper, and quite often neither do their neighbors. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Maduro, and Castro come to mind.

Fisher Ames, in the 18th Century, likened monarchies to merchantmen, the majestic sailing ships of his day that provided apparent safety and provoked a sense of elation. Inevitably, however, he asserted, such great ships hit a reef and sink. Democracy, on the other hand, is like a raft. It seldom sinks, but you almost always have your feet wet.

He could have added that merchantmen require a captain, a strong, perhaps heroic, figure, able to give orders and impose discipline. The crew need only have strong backs and a compliant mind. "Rafts," democracies, need few or no permanent officers. They rely upon a strong-witted, self-reliant, and self-disciplined crew.

One should not be so shortsighted as to believe that national heroes serve no purpose or are never needed. A people in crisis often must be able to evoke heroes from the past or give birth to new ones to serve the present. Should our nation find itself deeply imperiled, it might well need a hero, and there is no reason to believe that Americans would be unable to meet the challenge. In the hoped-for absence of a national peril, the shortage of living heroes is not worrisome.

America does not now need a strong hero in whom citizens can invest emotionally so that they themselves may benefit. America needs strong citizens who will invest in themselves so that democracy can benefit.

America is gritty and creative. This is not a hollow proclamation of American exceptionalism. We remain haunted by huge past horrors such as slavery, WW II Japanese internment, Vietnam and Iraq Wars, unequal voting access, and today's vastly distorted wealth distribution.

Still, be heartened by President Lyndon Baines Johnson's words upon the assassination of President Kennedy:

> *Our enemies frequently make the same mistake. In my lifetime — in depression and in war — they have awaited our defeat. Each time, from the secret reserves of the American heart, came forth an unseen faith of an unimagined magnitude. It brought us victory. And it will again.*
>
> *Ideally, that is what America is all about.*

National Politics: The June Democratic Presidential Candidates' Debate

James W. Guthrie

Consistent with pundit predictions, the two-night, four-hour prime time Democratic-candidate debate was a circular firing squad, Democratic candidates criticizing one another, trying to crowd each other out of an over crowded race. On night one, TV hosts Savannah Guthrie and Lester Holt were quick-witted and successful lion tamers. Night two was different. Debating candidates misbehaved so badly and talked over each other so frequently that California Senator Kamala Harris captured the moment by screaming into her microphone, "Viewers want a debate, not a food fight." She showed herself to be the "adult in the room." She was to play an even more important role later.

There were disappointments and surprises. On night one, Elizabeth Warren, was privileged by, slathered over, and often fed softball questions from TV host Rachel Maddow. To Warren's credit, she had the fortitude, unlike most of her candidate competitors, to admit that there are no easy answers on gun control.

Several candidates embarrassed themselves. Beto O'Rourke, Cory Booker, and Bill De Biasio uttered only shallow slogans. De Biasio's, who appears to have popped out of a Cracker Jack box, principal contribution was repeatedly to mention that he was the mayor of the nation's largest city. Washington governor Jay Inslee was a one trick pony, knowing a great deal about the environment and very little about anything else. He also audaciously claimed more knowledge about abortion than the three women on the platform. Minnesota Senator Amy Klubochar needed only a few words to shut him up.

Two of the candidates portrayed themselves as "pander bears," by striving, even sweating, to speak Spanish when it was clearly theatric and inauthentic.

Three candidates emerged in unexpected and favorable ways. Senator Amy Klubochar, Hawaii Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, and South Bend mayor, Peter Buttigieg showed themselves to be poised, capable of give-and-take, and virtually fearless when confronted with tough questions. They were the biggest surprises and could emerge as the biggest beneficiaries of the debate; none had heretofore been granted much airtime. A Harris-Buttigieg ticket is already being floated.

Former Obama administration Housing Secretary Julian Castro, who genuinely speaks Spanish, also had a big and new to idea. He proposed a Marshall plan for Central America, hoping to stifle future immigration issues by rendering poverty-stricken nations such as Honduras and Guatemala economically viable. Then, he should have left

well enough alone. He went off the deep end by energetically trumpeting "justice and equal access to abortion" for transgendered women, individuals who used to be men.

The big guns, at least if attending to polling results, Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden, appeared on night two. Here was a defining moment. Kamala Harris, and several other candidates attacked Biden. He was said to be too old, formerly on the wrong side of racial desegregation, and it was time for him to "pass the torch." Biden was visibly shaken and began to stammer.

Kamala Harris was the big winner in round one. She now is a candidate in the same league as Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, and Joe Biden. Round two, to include the ten highest polling candidates, will take place in July.

San Francisco Politics: Past, Present, and (Only God Dare Predict the) Future

James W. Guthrie

Victor Arnautoff was a mid-20th Century political refugee from the Ukraine. He was an idealistic Jew who emigrated to the U.S. upon realizing Stalin's murderous anti-Semitic pogroms and torture of Kulaks portended ill for the Soviet Revolution, a movement for which initially he had held high hopes.

He arrived in San Francisco in the midst of the Great Depression, and was delighted to receive a Works Progress Administration commission to paint a fresco mural.* for the newly opened George Washington High School. He thought the new school beautiful and he intended to create a mural reflecting its majesty. He vowed his art would accurately depict the life of George Washington, both the good and the bad.

Arnautoff was a skilled artisan capable of telling a story graphically. He had experienced government enslavement and broken political promises in the Soviet Union, and he wanted to warn his new nation of possible perils. Through art, he hoped to promote peace and to protect future generations from past evils. How ironic, that his art is now at the center of San Francisco's newest form of dysfunctional politics.

Since its gaudy Gold Rush days, San Francisco has had a good number of goofy government officials. In the 1860's, there was Emperor Norton, who adopted the title "Norton I" and proclaimed himself Emperor of the United States.

Emperor Norton

In the 1950's and 60's, there were the Burtons, a colorful family clan who dominated a large part of San Francisco using old-fashioned Irish-Mafia thuggery.

We have also had good politicos. Diane Feinstein, who, before becoming a U.S. Senator, was a remarkably capable mayor, had to make difficult, and often unpopular, decisions in order to stifle the scourge of AIDS.

Mayor George Moscone, until his unfortunate assassination, led a balanced approach supporting new development and simultaneously preserving the City's history.

Unfortunately, the current San Francisco Unified School District Board of Education, or at least a large majority of its seven members, are carving a route to an all-time goofy governing award. In an effort to fulfill petty political ambitions, they are resorting to partisan pandering. The School Board has mindlessly acquiesced to a victim mentality and constructed a canard of white supremacy and "colonialism" as a cover for abdicating their electoral responsibility.

* A mural is a painting on a wall, ceiling, or other large surface. A "fresco" is the use of water-soluble colors to paint on dry or wet limestone.

Instead of concentrating on the school district's actual challenges e.g., finding solutions to persistent low achievement, teaching new immigrants English, and promoting a culture of high-performance, they are wasting their time and likely a great deal of public money on ordering the destruction of Arnautoff's historically accurate and artistically significant WPA mural.

Arnautoff's detractors, those desiring his Washington High School mural be destroyed or removed, offer the following justifications:

> *The mural celebrates and sustains the toxic myth of "White Supremacy."*
>
> *The mural has no relevance for today's youth.*
>
> *The mural inflicts psychological harm on Indian and African American students.**

Defenders concentrate their arguments on the historic significance of the mural, the dangers of censorship, and the artistic merits of Arnautoff's work. One of the most eloquent and rational defenders has been Joel Britton, the Socialist Workers Party candidate for San Francisco mayor.†

On Tuesday, June 18, 2019, the School board held a public meeting, purportedly to hear both sides of the issue regarding mural removal. An audience of 200 or more was present. Sixty individuals took an hour to make their position clear, 30 minutes per side. After, four of the seven elected school board members displayed their complete lack disregard for the arguments made by mural defenders and announced that at the action meeting to be held on June 25, they would vote to remove the murals.

> School superintendent Vincent Mathews volunteered in his remarks to the audience that upon viewing the murals' portrayal of slavery and Indian torture, he "…had a hunk of soul ripped from him."

A school district facilities official put forth three removal scenarios and attached a price to each (If the following dollar amounts make no sense to readers, be assured this is what the school administrator said, even if you gulp in disbelief.)

Mural removal costs range from $375,000 to cover the panels with fabric and up to $1 million to remove them all together. No school board member offered a dissent and only one member of the audience asked if there were more productive alternative uses of the funds.

> Mural detractors frequently used allotted speaking time to admonish school board members to: "Be on the Right side of History." It is difficult to imagine destroying critically acclaimed art can ever place someone on the right side of history.

The school board met again on Tuesday evening, June 25. Amid an emotionally charged outpouring of mural destructionists' and community activists' hoots, hollers, Indian war cries jeers, and tears, the school board voted unanimously to remove the murals from public view. When queried regarding the high costs of mural removal, the board's response was that it was but a small down payment due "First Nation" survivors for the harm historically visited upon them by white colonialists.

All the above would be but tacky and possibly inconsequential political theater but for the distraction it triggers regarding the school district's sorry academic performance.

A disproportionately large and growing segment of middle-class families have already lost confidence and now relies on non-public schools.

Remaining students, many from low-income families badly need good public schools in order to pursue their dreams. Regardless, the school board is doing little to elevate low achievement, low graduation rates, and low parental engagement.

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* A Tuesday June 18 board meeting audience member, proclaiming to be a psychologist, asserted she had scientific evidence of the mental impairment inflicted upon students by exposure to the mural's depiction of slave and Indian mistreatment. No one present openly disputed her statement or giggled. If these 19th Century portrayals were upsetting just imagine the anguish visited upon these same students should they ever learn of D-Day.

† A YouTube video featuring, Professor Dewey Crumpler, an African-American muralist, offers an articulate argument for preserving the mural as an instrument of education, https://youtu.be/sZEMpyvdAXQ

Regrettably, in politics, you frequently get what you ignore. Too few San Franciscans see the School Board as significant and as a consequence, too many uninformed individuals have prevailed and now hold elected positions of influence.

East to West: A Tale of Two Cities

Paul Sedway

My wife Lynn and I stopped off in New York City in mid-June on our way to our grandson's high school graduation in Chapel Hill. It didn't seem like much of a detour. We stayed, as we always do, at The Sofitel, on West 44th, between 5th and 6th. It's one of our favorite blocks in Manhattan, with lots of good restaurants (db Moderne, Kellari, Gaby, and until recently, Triomphe), good hotels, notable facilities (NY Yacht Club, and the Penn and Harvard Clubs), and most importantly a short walk to the Theater District. The only thing that could help to improve that block would be street trees, but New York long ago decided that those would be confined to residential blocks, an unwise decision in my opinion. Just look what trees on commercial streets have done to make Paris a magnificent world city.

We couldn't help but compare Manhattan with San Francisco. Unfair, you say, because we are about one-half the population. True enough. Yet there are lessons to be learned.

Of course there is the obvious lack of homeless on the NYC streets, mostly because of NY State's right to shelter law. Panhandling is rarely encountered. Streets are cleaner despite a new NYC policy of removing trashcans and encouraging people to take their trash home with them. We saw a unique protest during the Puerto Rico Day Parade: mailboxes stuffed with trash!

The striking contrast is always the architecture. It's as though talented designers refuse to come west. Our own emerging skyline seems bland in comparison. That may be due to the exhausting reviews by our permitting agencies, or the frequent use of development competitions that play it safe and give us buildings like the undistinguished Salesforce Tower. (Just as Londoners make friendly fun of one of their buildings by calling it The Gherkin, we might call our tallest, The Cucumber).

I visited the new transit terminal next to The World Trade Center designed by Calatrava and called the Oculus. Amazing, the good one can do with four billion dollars! It is not only spectacular architecture but serves to connect with lucid signage for every subway line and the New Jersey PATH System entering Lower Manhattan. By contrast, our own terminal designers were unable even to figure out how to connect to our integrative BART system.

Our trip to the new Hudson Yards project on the west side reminded me of the Giants Mission Rock project design. Both struggle to relate to the city around them, but at least Hudson Yards has the High Line to help.

Perhaps NYC v. SF is not a fair contest. Yet given the new money filling our city and the legendary brainpower at our disposal, we should be able to hold our own. But based on our recent NYC visit, about the only things SF can now boast about are our closer-in airport and the Warriors!

Entrez Nous

Sugar Caen

Austin and Van Ness (SFT 1501) have returned from a Covia contracted couple's compatibility counseling cruise ever more resolved to stop bickering. Let's listen.

Aus: What's was the petition submitted in June to the Resident Council all about?

Van: I, and 68 others, signed it hoping to provoke a productive conversation about the role of the SFT Resident Council.

Aus: I think the Council does a terrific job. One should remember that they're volunteers and that they spend a great deal of time in our behalf. Why stir up trouble?

Van: I think some of the things the Council has done and is doing are terrific. Overseeing the Employee Appreciation Fund for example.

However, some past Council actions were not so terrific. How about the unilateral and quite abrupt decision not to serve hard alcohol at the monthly mixers? What in the world justified that?

Aus: That is a small matter, but it was sort of weird was it not? Are we back to the 1920's Women's Christian Temperance Union movement?

Van: Remember when we had the threat of skilled nursing closure? The Council was not at the front of the protective effort. If it had not been for several thoughtful and courageous residents, no one knows what the outcome might've been, including closing our skilled nursing, or least locating it somewhere distant.

Aus: How did the June 26 Council meeting go?

Van: It was a proud SFT moment. Instead of being defensive, Council members took the opportunity to use the petition, and the intent behind it, to better inform SFT residents regarding Covia governance and management practices.

Aus: So! What remains as your fundamental complaint about the Council?

Van: I think there are added steps to be taken to ensure that the Council is at least neutral regarding Covia management matters and, it would be better yet if the Council began to take the residents' side on controversial issues.

Aus: Give me one instance when the Council has been on the wrong side?

Van: When Covia unilaterally divorced itself from the Episcopal Church, the Council was not active in opposition. Indeed, a few Council members acted as apologists for Covia.

Aus: I think you conveniently forget that some SFT members do not hold a favorable view of the Bishop, and the church. In fact, when was the last time we saw the Bishop around here? He was scheduled to be here at Christmas and didn't show up.

Van: Touché: It is sometimes difficult to defend the Bishop and the Church when they are virtually invisible to us. Still, they are likely to prevail in their appellate lawsuit against Covia and that will be to our collective advantage, even though we bear Covia's legal costs..

Aus: Am I to believe that it is the relationship with the Church that you regard as the fundamental issue and want the Council to address more forcefully?

Van: There is another equally large or larger issue. Annual fee increases are a definite problem. SFT residents are likely being charged, and repeatedly being charged, more than they should be.

Aus: I have heard members of the Council's Finance Committee and the Finance Study Group state that they have met with management repeatedly and have argued vociferously to reduce monthly fee increases. Are you unfairly discounting their efforts?

Van: I am grateful for what they try to do. But, frankly, it is not working. I think a new approach is in order. Current budgeting procedures are costing each resident, on average, an estimated $2,000 a year in unjustified fee increases The time has come to propose and defend a 2% annual maximum increase. If there is a catastrophic event, Covia can justify a larger fee.

Aus: I have heard Kevin Gerber and other Covia managers argue that a Los Gatos presence is needed to remain "competitive."

Van: And, therein resides a crucial issue for the Council. With a mile-long waiting list, Covia is already meeting the competition. What is needed is an organization that is BETTER, not BIGGER.

Aus: That is a slick slogan, but what does it mean?

Van: Meeting a labor shortage, not meeting competition, is the biggest challenge. Why doesn't Covia concentrate on obtaining housing for its employees? That would be getting better rather than getting bigger.

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