

Reflections

If you search my name on the Internet at the present time (a few weeks after my 91st birthday as I begin writing this), you would probably find that I am now listed as an inventor of puzzles. I would hope to see that changed someday. In my 312-page *Compendium* published in 2018, I shy away from using the word “invent.” Instead, one finds “explore” and “discover” used more often. As for the word “puzzle,” which is so often associated with children’s toys, I actually set out to write my *Compendium* without once using that unfortunate word, but of course it proved to be hopelessly awkward, so we must live with it.

If given the opportunity to choose, I would rather be listed as a writer. I say writer rather than author because the latter sounds too much like some learned professor expounding, or perhaps someone cranking out pulp novels by the dozens. Furthermore I would include under the heading of writer not only my six books, three of which are now in print, but also several dozen shorter works both fiction and non-fiction, some verse and even a few songs with lyrics, plus of course this.

Or how about being listed as an artist? At the beginning of my woodworking craft in 1970, I adopted the slogan “*AP-ART, the sculptural art that comes apart.*” Over the years I have used a couple variations – *the polyhedral art...* or *the geometric art...*, but always including the word *art*. However I would decline to call myself an artist out of respect for all those who really were, such as the great Masters of the Renaissance.

I have now been a woodcrafter for the past fifty years. Before that I was, in chronological order, an electrical engineer, maker of canoes and kayaks, farmer and nurseryman of sorts. I was also engaged in a few other minor occupations and enterprises. In looking back now, I have to ask myself what has been accomplished by all of that, and perhaps more to the point, what remains to be done at this late date? Accordingly, I plan to spend some time now on this, my latest and probably last writing project, trying to answer that question.

Part 1, Work

My first job, fresh out of UMass School of Engineering in 1953, was at the MIT Digital Computer Laboratory. The Lab was then undergoing rapid expansion, not only because of the success of Whirlwind, the world's first high speed digital computer (hence the name), but also because of the Air Force contract to develop a prototype for the computer that would be the heart of the SAGE (semi-automatic ground environment) North American air defense system.

My boss, Joe Gano, had earned his BS in ME from Harvard University School of Engineering a few years earlier, and had been hired to manage and improve the Whirlwind power supplies. He had recently completed his Master's thesis at MIT having to do with solving a problem in servomechanisms as it affected power supply regulation, too technical to describe here. By the time I arrived, Joe had three or four other engineers besides me working on power, so his job became more management, and I was assigned to continue his work on improved voltage regulation of the Whirlwind D-C power supplies. Ironically, I believe that Whirlwind's original intended purpose was to solve problems in servodynamics, especially torpedo guidance, and when I arrived we were still using some business forms with the heading of MIT Servomechanisms Laboratory.

I did not graduate in June 1952 with the rest of my class at UMass because I had failed a course in English literature, reading and analyzing the boring novel *Henry Esmond* by Thackeray, and had to stay an extra semester to make it up. Consequently, when I graduated in February 1953 there were scarcely any job interviews, so I applied for the first one available, which was of course at the MIT Computer Lab.

And here the story becomes really bizarre. With only one required course in my extra semester at UMass, for once I had the opportunity to take electives, and one that I took was a graduate course in servomechanisms given by my good friend Prof. Robert Brown, Head of the EE Department. The principles of servomechanisms may have been studied earlier, but it was during World War II that they came into the fore, especially for maintaining the aim of big battleship guns while the ship was pitching about in rough seas. Prof. Brown was quite knowledgeable about the battleship application so I assume he must have had some personal experience with it.

Prof. Brown was too busy to devote much time to that class or even attend, so another grad student and I were on our own in the lab, and I do not recall learning a single thing of any importance. Luckily however, that graduate class in servomechanisms did appear on my resume, and I am pretty sure it played a significant role in my being hired to continue Joe Gano's work in that field. That one word thus changed the whole direction of my life. This sort of thing probably happens all the time, usually without much notice. In my case, I am exceedingly happy with the course my life has taken, and I thank my lucky stars.

By the way, I am writing now from memory about some of these things that happened nearly seventy years ago. I think I still have a clear and accurate recall of them, which is

surprising, since I often cannot remember where I put my glasses or if I have taken my pills. Yet I have the theory that what we think we are vividly remembering that far back is not the actual story but rather one that has been re-circulated in and out of memory, somewhat like I am doing on this computer. But unlike this computer, it might change slightly each time, and over the years become unknowingly distorted. Thus, it may be possible to create a vivid memory of something that never even happened. I will try to take that into account.

My first assignment was to familiarize myself with the two big arrays of regulated D-C power supplies, one for Whirlwind and the other for the expansion of the Lab into the nearby Whittemore Building. And I do mean big. The 150-volt and 250-volt supplies were both 50 amp, and one had to be careful working around them. There were some amusing incidents such as the one involving exploding fuse holders that I have already written about elsewhere.

After that, my next assignment was to spend a week or more studying Joe's thesis. I found and pointed out one or two mistakes, which was perhaps not a good idea, as Joe did not take it well. Believe it or not, a great deal of effort, including testing with complicated lab equipment, went into designing what was called a compensating filter consisting of just two resistors and two capacitors. I delved into that with a passion and came up with an improved design that I believe could not be improved any further. Joe at first disputed this, and I have to think he was disappointed at not having discovered it himself.

As I look back now, I find it hard to believe that I would have been paid a handsome salary (\$310 a month) partly to design that filter. But there was also other work that was more in keeping with my interests. Those power supplies were poorly made by the now defunct Power Equipment Company, and my job was to completely rebuild them with better and more reliable parts and wiring. This brought me into contact with the machine shop, the assembly shop, purchasing, and drafting department, all of which was an interesting and valuable experience.

I think of that as the best job I ever had. But it lasted only a year and a half. Many of us were then transferred to Lincoln Laboratory in Lexington to work on XD-1, a huge computer that occupied an entire new building adjacent to the original four. Again I was responsible for the regulated D-C power supplies, but this time four or five times larger. They were poorly designed and poorly made by GE in Lynn. I wrote some critical things about them in my regular bi-weekly reports, which some found amusing but management asked me to tone down a bit. There were a few failures that resulted in minor fires. There was fear that accidental over-voltage, as sometimes happened, might cause one capacitor the size of a tin can to explode, which might then lead to a cataclysmic chain reaction explosion involving hundreds, all packed close together in racks, but thankfully it never happened.

The XD-1 computer had 49,000 vacuum tubes and used 3000 kw of power. It must have been by far the most massive computer ever built, at a cost of many millions. (Now your

cell phone has more computing power, memory, and speed.) Another interesting sidelight is that we regularly had access to classified presentations on related issues including the new and very real threat of intercontinental ballistic missiles, against which our huge Sage System was completely useless. I left in 1959 wondering what was the use of it all, as did many of my associates. I feel free to write about this now, but for a while one had to be careful because it was all classified. You can find a thorough history of MIT Lincoln Laboratory on the Internet. When I read it recently, I was pleased to find mention of ALRI, which stood for airborne long range input. I will skip the details here since they are given in the article, but I will mention that our team of half a dozen engineers designed and built the computer for it, which I believe was the world's first airborne digital computer. I was responsible for the core memory, having long since branched out into other things besides power supplies. My new specialty was designing switching circuits, using transistors of course rather than vacuum tubes. Before I take too much credit for the ALRI computer I should mention that we were mostly applying technology already developed by others.

That was the last thing worth mentioning that I did while at Lincoln Lab, and I have serious doubts that ALRI played any useful role in our country's defense. In 1959 most of us were transferred again, this time to MITRE Corp. whether we liked it or not, and I especially did not. We were supposed to be involved in overseeing defense contracts, far removed from my favorite place at the workbench. After a year there and having been assigned nothing useful to do, I quit and went to work for Dynamic Controls Company in North Cambridge as design engineer. Our specialty was magnetic amplifier regulated power supplies, alas at just about the time they were becoming obsolete. So we switched to making mini-computers using plug-in transistor modules, just when they too were soon to become obsolete. And I forgot to mention, at Whirlwind I became an expert in thyatron-regulated power supplies just as they were likewise becoming obsolete, so much so that word-check on my computer does not even recognize the word *thyatron*. Most of the Whirlwind computer, alas minus my well-regulated power supplies, ended up in a museum.

In 1962 I decided to go into the business of making kayaks, canoes, and paddles. I continued to work for Dynamic Controls for two more years as a consultant while at the same time working long into the night in my makeshift basement workshop in Arlington Heights. With the oldest of our three little girls approaching school age, and also needing a proper work place, in 1964 Jane and I moved from Arlington to Lincoln. I quit the electronics industry for good and never looked back, and thus did a decade of my life become spent on doing nothing useful to humanity. The story of our glorious homesteading on that nine-acre farm is told in my book *Tipcart Tales*, which last I knew was still being published and sold by Collective Copies.

Part 2, Life in Lincoln

When I left the corporate world and choose to instead try earning a living using my hands, our income was cut about in half. Jane, who grew up on her father's humble poultry farm in New Hampshire, adapted to it without much complaint, and later also our three girls. We grew fruit, vegetables, and nuts. We raised chickens, ducks, geese, and occasionally other livestock. I produced and sold honey, made maple syrup, and heated almost entirely with wood. We drove an old Suburban Carryall and lived in a dilapidated house, both of which I kept more or less in repair. We shopped for bargains in the *Want Advertiser* and *Weekly Market Bulletin*, especially for farm and garden supplies.

We were lucky to have chosen Lincoln for our new home. When other nearby towns were imposing ever more zoning restrictions on what one could do, Lincoln actually encouraged home enterprise, and many I know worked out of their home office or workshop. It was a tradition of longstanding in the town, and likewise gardening. I won't go much into the history of Lincoln because I am no expert, and it can be found elsewhere. Most books on it, such as *A Rich Harvest* by John MacLean (1987), concentrate on the center of town and prominent people who have lived there, while the agricultural southern part of town is largely ignored. I tried to correct that when in 2013 I was asked to give a slide presentation to a joint meeting of the Lincoln Historical Society and Council on Aging about life and times on our farm and at my workshop. It is available at: "Stew Coffin Live in Lincoln on VIMCO."

After the War, most towns in the western suburbs were undergoing rapid expansion as families moved out from the city to greener pastures, especially veterans. It was also spurred by the growth of business on the newly created Route 128 commercial belt. But Lincoln was different. Much farming was still taking place, thanks in part to excellent soil. Many large tracts of open land were in estates owned by the wealthy who commuted by train to their businesses in Boston. Some of that land was donated to the town for conservation, and some was bought by the town for that purpose. Another factor in the slow growth was two acre minimum zoning for new homes. The argument given for all this was that by restricting growth, the school enrollment was also kept in check, so the conservation purchases practically paid for themselves, since half the Town budget was for the schools.

By the time we arrived, all that was changing. The two-acre zoning became known as "snob zoning," and perhaps justifiably so. The town's long history of conservative politics and frugal spending, as revealed in the Town Reports that I eagerly studied going back many decades, was now headed in somewhat the opposite direction. I took quite an interest in this because our real estate tax, starting around \$900 and going up each year, was our largest single expense. I made a nuisance of myself by attended most town committee meetings that had any bearing on spending, often being the only non-official person in attendance. All this came to a head around 1970 with the proposed new school building partly to accommodate the increased enrollment from the daily bussing of Boston school children.

Jane and I aligned ourselves with a distinct minority of voters in Lincoln who might be called budget watchdogs and who questioned the need for the proposed new school building. But one had to be careful. For us it was simply the cost. But opposition was taken to mean opposition to bussing, which in turn was labeled as racial prejudice (or worse). There were a few others, Norman Hapgood in particular, who were more outspoken watchdogs than I was. I never spoke a strong word at Town Meeting and I don't recall any others doing so either, another Lincoln tradition. My method was simply to politely ask carefully prepared questions that usually I already knew the answer to. I have to admit that sometimes I hoped to receive an answer that I could then correct. But it was all in vain. Town Meeting took place in the school auditorium that held only about 25% of registered voters, so most of those present were either members of some committee or board, or family members or friends of, and most of them wealthy and prominent. In the face of all that, it was seldom a good idea to oppose spending articles with so many of those present supporting each other's pet article.

I was once actually able to influence and possibly defeat a spending article. I believe Lincoln was one of the first towns in Middlesex County to ban aerial spraying for mosquitoes, consequently they were numerous. Under pressure from some residents, the town appointed a special Mosquito Control Committee to investigate. They came up with a plan to equip the town with electric bug zappers. Their article at Town Meeting was for purchase of only a few as a pilot program to see if they worked before zapping more of the town. These were no ordinary zappers but rather state of the art and expensive, around \$600 as I recall. I asked how much it might then cost to do the whole town, having already arrived at an estimate. After some calculating, we were given an answer that I believe was honest, there was a murmur from the floor, and the article was defeated by voice vote, but perhaps not only because of the cost. Those zappers were in disfavor by environmentalists because they proved not only ineffective as proposed, but they also killed desirable insects.

And then there was the hopelessly misguided effort at one Town Meeting by a couple members of the John Birch Society, one of whom was a resident, to convert some of Lincoln's conservation lands into a commercial country club and golf course owned and operated for profit by the town. Moderator Ken Bergen patiently let them make their carefully prepared presentation, including financial figures and estimates of profitability, even though we all knew that it had no chance of passing or even receiving any support. So we all sat politely and mostly in silence until they finished, and then ended it all by voice vote. One of the presenters was a neighbor of ours, Joe B., whom I knew personally and was otherwise friendly with. Evidently the Birchers regarded putting land into conservation when it might otherwise be used for profit as some sort of left wing scheme. Joe and his family soon left Lincoln – "too many lefties" was the way he put it - and moved to Acton. I always wondered how he made out there.

Before being misunderstood, I should mention that I included some of those prominent and wealthy in town among our good friends. Many of them I knew through the group organized by Tom Adams that met regularly to discuss the Vietnam War. Most were of course opposed to the war, but Tom invited all sides to participate. I was neutral at first,

but later agreed with the opposition. Tom and his brother John Quincy Adams were both direct descendants of U.S. presidents. Another friend was Mike Spock, son of Dr. Spock. Yet another was Ken Bergen, prominent Boston lawyer and our Town Moderator, also Senator Jim DeNormandie, printer Michael McCurdy, and publisher Paul Brooks.

Another aspect of our social life revolved around families in Lincoln and surrounding towns active in 4H. Jane was a 4H leader, officially in poultry but her interests were much broader than that. I was briefly leader in the fife & drum marching band. And then there were our wonderful farming neighbors we were so lucky to have. Next door was retired farmer Hans Van Leer, and on the other side, one-horse farmer old Ray Bowles and his sister Bertha. Beyond Bowles was the large vegetable farm of Gus Shumacher. To our north was Boyce Farm and Drumlin Farm, and across the way the pasture for Ellen Raja's sheep. We couldn't have asked for better neighbors and neighborhood than we blindly stumbled into. We strove to be good neighbors too.

Now getting back to our tax burden, what finally came to our rescue was Chapter 61-A of the Massachusetts General Laws which cut our taxes in half if we could simply show a certain level of farm income each year, which we did. I believe it was \$600. Much of that income came from the sale of trees or large rhododendrons at around \$200 each, dug up and removed by landscape contractors using a professional tree spade and large truck. Added to that, our family finances gradually improved. In 1970 I switched my workshop from paddles to the more profitable AP-ART woodcraft. Jane worked part-time, and later so did our three girls. Looking back now, I would say we actually lived quite well.

In retrospect, I think it might have been better from the start just accepting the Town of Lincoln finances as they were. As time went by, my perspective gradually mellowed. Most of those in control of the Town, whom I have sometimes referred to as the social aristocracy, were basically good people, sincerely dedicated to their various ideals and responsibilities and from their own point of view doing what they thought best for the town. And as I have said, many became good friends.

And now for the reckoning. Our total taxes paid to the town over 35 years probably amounted to less than \$50,000, for which we received in return amenities that would be the envy of most other towns around - good schools and library, open space, trails and conservation lands, and still much farmland. We had paid \$37,500 for the property in 1964. When Jane died in 1991, I had the property appraised for probate at \$1,650,000, which was based on bulldozing the entire lot while probably removing some of that fine topsoil and then putting up three or four huge new homes. We all realized it was not what Jane would have wanted, so I donated the land minus the house and two-acre lot to the Town of Lincoln in the form of a permanent conservation easement worth almost a million dollars. I believe it was one of the largest such gifts ever given to the town, so I was surprised to see it not even mentioned in the Town Report, and I always wondered why. But I have never had any second thoughts about making that donation, and I'm sure Jane would have approved.

Part 3, My Place in the Great Outdoors

I have already written a lot about how I came to love the great outdoors, starting from childhood, in my book *Tall Trees and Wild Bees*, so I will skip over that here. If you search on the Internet, you will find me listed as the author of *Black Spruce Journals*, a book unfortunately no longer in print, about canoe tripping in the Maine Woods and the wilds of Canada. You will also find excerpts and several photos from it. One of these days I hope to make it available on my website. That being the case, I will not dwell on the contents here, but instead tell a bit about the background.

I started collecting material for a book of some sort almost from the start of my canoeing days, which began with an AMC beginner's whitewater canoeing instruction on the Piscataquog River in the early spring of 1954. It was there that I met Jane, my future wife and faithful companion for the next 37 years. For many years I kept a photographic record of our canoeing adventures, taken with my trusty Argoflex twin lens reflex camera with 2-1/4 square format and later with a Graflex view camera. I processed and enlarged those black & white photos, first using my father's darkroom in North Amherst and later my own in Lincoln, always with the thought that they might eventually find their way into publications of some sort. I also accumulated many Kodachrome slides using a 35 mm Exakta.

In 1956 I started writing articles about our canoeing adventures, mostly for publication in *Appalachia*, sixteen articles over the next 50 years. My stuff also appeared in *American White Water*, *Canoe*, *CHE-MUN*, and *Nastawgan*, well illustrated of course. One article I would especially single out was four full-page photos plus a center-spread panorama titled *North Country Album* in the March 1981 issue of *Canoe*. I also started dabbling in fiction. To my surprise, my story *Windbound* was printed in the December 1988 issue of *Appalachia*, one of the few semi-fictional pieces I have known to appear in that magazine.

I also kept daily notes of our canoe trips, first in the Maine Woods, later in the Canadian wilderness, and made copies available to other canoeing parties. Last I knew, it was possible to find them on the Internet, especially those that the Wilderness Canoe Association of Canada has taken an interest in. I still have copies of them.

Starting in 1955, Jane and I spent much of our free time scouting rivers for the first edition of the *AMC New England Canoeing Guide*. I donated my rough draft to the AMC in 1962, and supplemented from several other sources it was published in 1965. Much more about this can be found in my article *The Story of the AMC New England Canoeing Guide* in the December 2002 *Appalachia Journal*.

Around 1995 I decided the time had come to assemble some of my writings, and especially photos, into a book and seek a publisher. Thanks to the computer, the assembly was easy enough to do. I sent a preliminary copy to Elliott Merrick, author of one of my favorite books *True North*. He was quite frank in his criticism, especially my confusing mixing of fact and fiction, and urged a complete re-do, which I did. A couple years later I

had a completely revised and improved manuscript. I thought I had done the hard part, and all I now needed was to give it to the AMC, as their staff person in charge of books had already given it his approval, probably based on my record as frequent contributor to *Appalachia* going back nearly 40 years. But there had been a change of staff, as was happening frequently in the AMC at that time, and the agreement was simply forgotten.

For the next eight years I tried ardently to find a publisher. During all that time I took the opportunity to revise and improve my book, page by page, word by word, over and over endlessly. One of my objectives was to make the lines flow more like poetry, with careful attention to euphony, syntax, and accent. Another was care with word breaks, line breaks, paragraph breaks, and placement of photos. Later I was pleased to hear that some readers did notice this unusual extra loving care I had taken. To detail all the disappointments I had with possible publishers would serve no purpose here. I learned that most publishers simply do not accept unsolicited book manuscripts. But there was one I will mention for its amusement value.

Around 2003 I found a publisher in Canada that accepted my manuscript. Even better, books like mine set in the wilds of Canada fit right in with their specialty of outdoor adventure. After several months had gone by with no book or even any progress to report, I began to wonder. Then the publisher contacted me by email to report that the job of editing had been given to an outside editor, and when nearly done he had a computer malfunction and lost the whole thing. Of course I wondered what he had been doing to my book all that time. So the work was begun again with a different editor, and again many months passed with nothing to report. Then in early May 2005 I received an email with attachment of the proposed text, which I was to review and make only minor corrections, and even those only if necessary, as the book was scheduled to go to press in a couple days.

The timing could not have been any worse, for in less than 48 hours I was scheduled to board a plane for two weeks of biking in the Czech Republic with Elderhostel and my partner Mary Dow. Just one glance was enough to see what had happened. The new editor had completely rewritten the whole thing, turning it into more of a collection of her short stories with some spice added. I immediately called a stop to the whole thing, hoping I was in time, and promised to respond when I got back and had time to review the disaster. You can imagine I had that cloud hanging over me all during our biking vacation.

Here is just a brief summary, as best I can now recall, of what that editor had done. Evidently she had run my text through her computer editing program that searched for certain things, and possibly corrected them. For example, the words *got* and *gotten* were never to be used (perhaps too Germanic sounding). Also, sentences in the passive voice were likewise forbidden, so all were changed to the active. Thus, instead of "The river was measured at 40,000 cfs," she instead wrote "We measured the river at 40,000 cfs," evidently assuming that our canoeing party took a year off to construct two concrete structures, string a steel cable equipped with measuring instruments across the one-third mile expanse, and conduct many complex measurements. When she rewrote my lines she

did not bother to check her own versions, which contained several sentences in the passive. To add more spice, she introduced a naked man into one of her stories. One of my chapters, on my five-week trip in the Barren Grounds, was much longer than the others, but that was unacceptable so she broke it into two or three separate adventures. Where I had written “we got off the train, she had written “we hopped off the train,” as explained above. But when we got off the train again on another trip, evidently her computer would not allow the same phrase used twice, so she wrote “we jumped off the train,” and this mind you with 80-lb canoe, three paddles, and three packs weighing about 75 lbs each. But why go on. I sent a strong message to the publisher, who then informed me that the editor was his wife, both of whom I have chosen not to identify.

The next adventure was with Heron Dance, a publisher in Vermont run by an artist who evidently went into the book publishing as a way of selling his artwork. He agreed to publish my *Black Spruce Journals*, but under the condition that I pay for the printing and binding, usually paid by the publisher, because of his dire finances. Next, my text had to be converted from MS Word to InDesign. That is something I couldn't do, but puzzle acquaintance John Rausch came to my rescue. Unfortunately, in doing so much of my careful formatting was wiped out. Some photos are not even on the right page. They did not like my cover photo, so that had to be changed. At one point I thought John was backing out over heated issues with the publisher, and I found myself in the predicament of acting as referee. But it finally got done, and published by Heron Dance in 2007, 1000 copies, 184 pages on good paper, with one of my black & white photos on nearly every page. A few months later, the publisher suddenly announced that he was quitting the book publishing business. In order to save my book from oblivion, I agreed to buy his remaining several hundred copies, which I sold or gave away until now only a few remain. I have saved all the photos and my original version in hopes that someday it can be printed the way I intended. In the meantime I tuck in a note explaining the imperfections and also adding the following: “Of all my literary efforts over these many years, *Black Spruce Journals* is certainly the one dearest to my heart.”

I have written two other shorter works having to do with canoeing adventures. My *Portage Trails and Campfire Tales*, 2009, is an eleven act play, and my *Black Spruce Country*, 2010, is a collection of nine fictional short stories. I have also composed two songs, *A Wilderness Lullaby* and *On the QNS&L*.

Part 4, Curiosity

I have always been curious. I spent part of the summer of 1950 on a tour of the western U.S. National Parks in the company of six others including a PhD in entomology, a PhD in physics, and a graduate student in botany. One evening around the campfire our discussion turned to evolution. I raised the question of whether the fundamental principles of biological evolution had yet to be worked out. It was no idle question, for I had been doing some reading on the subject to satisfy my curiosity. The response was quick and firm; everything important had been worked out, leaving but a few details. But then I had the audacity to suggest the possibility of passing on acquired characteristics, and that was met with even firmer correction. My suggestion was based on my observation of how rapidly wild animals adapt to new circumstances, crows in particular. By characteristics I meant more specifically behavior. How could that possibly take place in only a few generations just by survival of the fittest? But if not, then what would be the mechanism? I never gave up on the notion, and over the years have looked for evidence to support my idea, especially the rapid adaptation of birds and animals to urban environment. And now, within the past ten years, I see that the whole question is being reconsidered in the light of recent experiments involving RNA. So keep posted.

I often reflect on how many unsolved scientific mysteries there still are in the world, and what fun it would have been to devote one's life trying to solve some of them. One that has always stood out is life itself. How does a string of DNA get converted into a special unique living organism? What is the essential difference between my DNA and that of J. S. Bach, and how come I can't compose a *Mass in B minor*? And then there is the brain. The brain of a midge must be ever so tiny, yet they can perform high speed aerial acrobatics far beyond what I can even imagine doing, as well as doing all the other things necessary to live and propagate without any outside help, which none of us can do, yet we like to think we are ever so much smarter. Yet another, how can all that information be stored in a single microscopic living cell? Has anyone ever been able to answer that question from the point of view of mathematical information theory? Over the years I have done a lot of reading looking for answers to some of these things, but so far have not come up with much. Alas, it is now too late, as I tend to soon fall asleep. But what fun it still is to think about these things, and now to at least write about them.

My greatest joy in canoeing was being on an unfamiliar river and discovering what lay around the next bend, or following an ancient portage trail and seeing where it led. That has even become one of my more pleasant dreams. Even better if the mysterious land was unmapped, which was hard enough to find even in the 1960s and of course impossible now. When on local walks or bike rides, I usually prefer to explore without use of any maps, and then look at the maps after my return to see where I have been. I often did this even when leading our regular Wednesday Walkers, sometimes making a few wrong turns to reach our intended destination, but my companions took it in stride and seldom complained. Nowadays I see that many hikers use hi-tech navigational aids that show every detail leading them to their destination, which to me takes away a lot of the fun. Some even stare at their screen map while ignoring the wildlife along the way, or chat on their phone instead of enjoying the bird songs and other sounds of the woods.

I remember reading *Kim* in my early teens, possibly my first real novel, and it left quite an impression on me, with lines that have stayed with me all through these many years, such as: “where Mahbub Ali, the horse-trader, lived when he came in from that mysterious land beyond the Passes of the North.” I always wondered, where were those passes? Another novel that later fed my imagination was *Lost Horizon*, for the same reason.

When I met Jane in 1954, she was already keen on mountaineering adventure books especially those by British mountaineers such as Shipton, Tilman, and Smythe, which she collected on the used book market. Of course I soon came to love them too. When she worked as librarian, she was able to spot and bring home books along similar lines that I too would enjoy reading. We also attended the many mountaineering lectures put on by the AMC. I was dismayed, as were some of my mountaineering friends, by the British first ascent of Everest with a large expedition organized along military lines, where the whole object was getting to the top. Added to our displeasure was the poor title the climbers chose for their AMC lecture: *The Conquest of Everest*. But Tilman was an exception. For him, the main object was the joy of exploration, especially trekking solo in the uncharted mountains of Central Asia. As I was biking across Labrador in 1983, I was thinking about his amazing feat in the 1930s of biking from his farm in East Africa 3000 miles across unmapped parts of Africa to the west coast in order to catch a budget boat ride back to his home in England.

It must have been my passion for exploring that let me to consider a career in astronomy. Astronomers are often peering into deep space with their ever more powerful telescopes, looking for new objects or trying to unravel some of the perplexing mysteries of the beyond. But UMass did not have a single class in astronomy, much less a major, so I would have had to go to Amherst College, which my family could not afford. But it was all to the good, for if I had been lucky enough to find a job in astronomy, it would probably have been one supported by public funds, and I would likely have ended up wondering why, for much the same reason I did at MITRE.

My curiosity about the mysterious outer space continues to this day. First of all, I have often wondered why anything even exists. How did the Universe come into being, with all that talk about the Big Bang? Why isn't there nothing instead? But that leads to a contradiction, because it is impossible for *something* (us) to conceive of *nothing*. So all we can do is marvel at the splendor of it all and call it God. “Who can explain it, who can tell you why? Fools give you reasons; wise men never try.”

And then there is the mysterious notion of an expanding Universe. For a long time I was curious about that too, based as far as I could see on indirect evidence, and I wrote letters to some well known astronomers wondering if there might be some other possible explanation. I actually got a few replies, some just cordial but others more scientific that I have saved. I still do not understand it, and am curious to know what the source of energy is to propel it all outward. What I like best about astronomy is that no one knows the answers to questions like that, and I even like to think it will forever remain that way. So

probably best that I did not pursue a career in astronomy. What I also question is the billions of public funds being spent searching for who knows what, especially now looking for life out there and perhaps even trying to contact it. I think we might be better off by instead taking better care of our own planet before advertising it blindly. And I wonder what the logic is of inviting complete strangers into our home.

I have always been skeptical about the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere in the Universe. Perhaps it is just nice to think we are so special. Likewise I question the likelihood of aliens visiting us now, sometimes friendly but usually raising havoc if you do much viewing of Sci-Fi movies, which I don't. It strikes me that if aliens did come here, considering the vast distances, time, and energy involved, they would most likely come, not in flying saucers but rather in the form of living organisms perhaps compressed even into the form of electromagnetic radiation. I wonder if any Sci-Fi writers have latched onto that idea. In any case, the way the world is in such chaos right now, it looks to me like mankind could use some outside help.

Which brings up the problem of climate change. Around 1980, when daughter Tammi was a student at College of the Atlantic, one day she brought up that alarming subject as being part of her college studies. I was already well aware of it, and I remember telling her that it just might have a silver lining because, for the first time in history, all nations will be forced to work in harmony to address the problem. I would still like to think so, but now I am having doubts. Climate change became a part of the United Nations agenda way back in 1972, but a lack of success in the first two decades led to the Earth Summit in 1992 and to the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, setting emission reduction targets on ratifying states, but with no means to enforce.

Climate change, as serious as it is, with water shortages, huge forest fires, storms, and people dying from heat, does not rank as among the most serious problems the world now faces, at least in my opinion. After all, we now know what is causing it and how to rectify it, which is more than can be said for some of our other problems now steadily getting worse.

Around 2006, after seeing Al Gore's slide show on global warming, I hastened to the library to read his book on the subject. I was especially curious to see why his slide show did not even address the major root of the problem, overpopulation of the world. Surely that would be included in his book. But alas, not a chapter, not a page, not even a single word. I do not mean to sound too critical. I found the book otherwise well written, and the film that followed won many awards. Actually I was not too surprised. Politicians are loath to confront sensitive issues. The irony of it is that the title *An Inconvenient Truth* was chosen to suggest that Gore had the courage to take an unpopular stand, when in fact by 2006 just the opposite was the case. By that time, only a small minority were questioning global warming, mostly extremist right-wing crackpots. Opportunity lost.

Severe overpopulation of the world is a problem to which there does not appear to be any politically practical solution at present. We all realize that we can't keep growing indefinitely, for eventually we run out of something: food, water, space, energy, our

sanity, or something else. Even before then, our woodland may have been converted to other uses such as housing, farming, or whatever, and even more species of wildlife will have been lost, both animal and vegetable. And already many of our urban areas are facing traffic gridlock and air pollution that can only grow worse. Sooner or later there will have to be a solution. But what? Making abortion and birth control freely available worldwide might at least help, but now I see we are sadly headed in exactly the opposite direction.

In 1945 the world population was around 2.5 billion. It reached 5 billion in 1987, 6 billion in 1999, 7 billion in 2011, and is 7.7 billion today. I like graphic displays of statistics. When these population figures are plotted against time, the graph does not show any sign of flattening but instead continues in a straight line upward. At one time it was estimated by the UN to peak at 9 billion, but a more recent estimate is 11 billion, and that could be way off. And the largest increase is now and will be in the most impoverished and underfed parts of the world. The UN does not address the sensitive issue of world overpopulation as a problem to be solved but only as something to be studied.

An article in the September 2000 issue of Discover magazine by editor Corey S. Powell was titled "20 Ways the World Could End." That used to be a subject popular mostly with science fiction authors, but lately it is being given more serious attention by scientists. Typically, the first five on Powell's list are astronomical (Powell is a cosmologist) such as asteroid impact, the next two are geological (giant volcano, magnetic field reversal), and several involve warfare (nuclear, biological, etc.). Some would be unavoidable (swallowed by black hole) while others are manmade and perhaps preventable (accidental gene manipulation). Some are instantaneous (particle accelerator gone awry) while others are gradual (mass insanity). But not even mentioned is overpopulation. You don't need a crystal ball for this one. Just look around.

Which brings up Jabe. Of all my outing club associates in the 1950s, he was the most colorful and influential, and with a brilliant mind. I have elsewhere written a short essay about him. He was the leader of that AMC canoe trip in the spring of 1954 where he paired Jane and me in the same canoe, perhaps with the idea of match-making. I often spent time with him at the Barn near Watertown Square repairing the AMC canoes or doing other work. He was an expert mechanic and jack-of-all-trades, although his job was designing radar antennas at Raytheon. As we worked he would ramble on about his philosophy of life, and I would mostly listen. He was critical of most if not all religions, but especially Catholic and any others that opposed abortion and birth control. On that subject he was evidently influenced by his father, whose academic career I gather must have had something to do with problems associated with overpopulation of the world.

One of Jabe's pet topics was eugenics. To many, that word now has a negative connotation, especially connected to racial cleansing in Nazi Germany. But a search in any encyclopedia will show that eugenics is a much broader term than that, with many different and perfectly benign meanings. The original meaning, attributed to Francis Galton, was *his research into...*, and who could object to that? Anyone who chooses to

have children, or not have, is practicing a form of eugenics, and whatever choice they make will likely have at least some slight lasting effect on the future of mankind. Bear in mind, I am now writing, as best I can recall, about Jabe's philosophy on the subject. He was concerned that, on average, the more impoverished and least resourceful tend to have the most children, and what this might mean for the future of mankind. The way he candidly put it: Back in the old days it was survival of the fittest, but nowadays we can keep anyone alive.

According to what I have read, the physical size of the human brain has been shrinking for the past 30,000 or 70,000 years, depending upon which source, with a multitude of explanation as to why, most of which make little sense. One explanation given by "scientists" is that our brains have become more efficient so that we can be smarter even with smaller brains, which does not seem to jibe at all with evolutionary theory. Also questionable is their assumption that we are becoming ever smarter. I would like to know how these presumed experts ever arrive at that amazing fact. Please show us the test results. I would assume exactly the opposite. Back in ages past, we sustained ourselves entirely on food hunted in the wild, built our own living shelter with materials at hand, and managed it and more, including bearing and raising children, all without any outside help. Even most animals can do that. How many of us could do that now? Are we really much more intelligent than even the Neanderthals, I wonder? If you believe so, again please show us the test results. I certainly would not rate myself any more intelligent than my distant ancestors, and will readily accept being probably less so. Unless you dispute the whole theory of evolution, our brains became larger by a process of natural selection, meaning more skillful hunters and fighters, and better caring mothers, all living longer and having more offspring. As evolutionary biologists point out, with the advance of agriculture, this process ceased and our brains no longer grew. Furthermore, because of harmful mutations, which vastly outnumber beneficial ones, our brains might actually shrink. But now within the past century or two, when we can keep almost anyone alive long enough to bear children, especially the least intelligent or even retarded, one would expect this dumbing down process to accelerate, as indeed appears to be the case.

It may be a mistake to try equating brain size too closely with IQ, and even more so IQ with intelligence. Back in Psych 25 class at UMass I remember what difficulties the pathetic Dr. F got into when discussing the subject. His first lesson: IQ is 50% inherited and 50% acquired, but of course giving no clue as to how those numbers were arrived at, and also giving no definition of IQ or means of measuring accurately. If storage and retrieval of acquired information be any measure of intelligence, then my computer would far outscore me. Furthermore, if IQ test score was any measure of intelligence, my very smart Cocker Spaniel would have tested zero. In this discussion, I am regarding the brain, animal or human, as just an amazingly powerful computer that comes into the world already load with capability and useful knowledge. What is fed into it later throughout one's lifetime has nothing to do with inborn intelligence.

Another explanation given for our shrinking brain size is that, with modern technology, we do not need as much brain power for some of those things I have mentioned, so the brain has shrunk accordingly. But again, one must assume that our brain size, just like the

rest of our body, has been governed by the laws of evolution, and those laws simply do not work that way. My ancestors had no use for diabetes or astigmatism, yet they do not go away or even shrink - quite the contrary. In the past, evolution is supposed to have worked entirely by natural selection, but the term “natural” does not so much apply any more. Plant and animal breeding is now often done by artificial selection. Our human evolution appears to be in a puzzling un-natural class all its own.

When it was reported that our brains were shrinking, I wondered if perhaps the vitally important frontal lobe was shrinking the most. Indeed some studies now suggest this may be the case, while others avoid touching this risky subject. One of the obstacles is that many years ago a practice that became known as phrenology attempted to correlate minor differences in skull shape with various personality traits, most of which is now considered a pseudoscience and is discredited.

Back in 1927 in Austria, a procedure known as insulin coma therapy was developed for treating patients with severe schizophrenia. They were given large doses of insulin and made intermittently unconscious for up to two months. The object was to destroy part of the frontal lobe, similar to the now also discredited prefrontal lobotomy. Those who survived the treatment (the mortality rate was an alarming 1 to 5%) were supposed to be more docile, childlike, and manageable. Controversial from the start, it was discontinued in the U.S. around 1950. Yet as late as 1956 it was still being used by one mental hospital in Massachusetts, but instead as an experimental treatment for severe depression. I take a special interest in this because of a personal connection.

Our frontal lobe is the most recent part of our brain to evolve, and has been described as what makes us human instead of animal. In brain injury such as concussion, it is usually the first part to shut down in order to preserve the part that controls vital functions like circulation and breathing, hence the effects of insulin coma therapy. The point of all this is that the frontal lobe is important, and any evolving loss of it should be a cause for concern.

The physical size of the brain may not correlate very closely with intelligence. Whales and elephants have larger brains than humans, and men's larger than women's. Having owned various breeds of dogs, I see that skull size does not correlate with intelligence, and likewise my experience with raising both dumb geese and a much smarter pet crow. We like to think we are much smarter than animals, but I am not so sure. We have the big advantage of a much more sophisticated spoken language, and more recently the development of writing and printing, all combined with the growth of culture resulting from the rise of agriculture in favorable parts of the world, and even more recently the development of education, without which what would our life be like? I think it is probably our sophisticated means of communication that sets us markedly apart from other animals. But more intelligent? I wonder. When and if we ever manage to communicate effectively with animals, perhaps even including insects, we may discover they are a lot smarter than we like to think, and perhaps in many ways even smarter than we are.

And how smart are we? Have you notice lately how many people drive cars and trucks as if retarded? Each day in the U.S. over 100 drivers manage to kill themselves or others by crashing into something, either another car or perhaps a house or store front, often deliberately, while hundreds of trucks overturn or fly off the road and crash. And now an increasing number of deaths are the result of road rage. It is reported that arrests for crazy speeding as sport are also at an all-time high. And now an alarming increase in mass shootings, substance abuse deaths, and suicides.

Even after twelve years of education in our public schools, over 20 million Americans nevertheless believe Bill Gates is the culprit behind the Covid-19 pandemic and is exploiting the crisis to establish a “new world order.” After voting for a woefully unfit scoundrel for President, nearly 100 million believe that a sinister conspiracy of voting fraud robbed him of reelection. It is reported that about 180 million Americans squander away \$70 billion of their hard-earned money on lottery tickets each year, with those who can least afford it or are even on welfare spending the most.

I also wonder how much of our brain we actually use. In my own case, I am often acutely aware of how poorly my brain functions, and I have come up with a theory about that. Some humans do amazing things that would seem to me almost superhuman, such as playing an entire piano concerto by memory, or reading a book and remembering every line, or being a genius at something like chess. But, alas, not I. Evidently the human body and brain can be trained to do these amazing things by long intense practice. Like many others I know, I have managed to drift through life with hardly ever the necessity of using my brain very intently. In sixteen years of mostly boring schooling, especially at UMass, the only class I recall that required much effort was foreign language, in which I did not apply myself and barely passed. The engineering courses were among the easiest, for all you really needed for most was common sense and a good grounding in physics, which I had in high school. As for my brief career in engineering already described, none of that required much brains. You may wonder about my work in designing and crafting my complex geometric AP-ART. As I have said many times, most of that was the result of simply painstaking hard work with much trial and error (mostly the latter!) carried on studiously and diligently for many years and requiring not nearly as much brain power as you might suppose.

I have thought a lot about things like that over the years, and have also done some reading on the subject. I like to imagine Jabe still alive today, and the two of us having one of those chats in the Barn. Here is what I might have said:

"Jabe, what you say is probably true, and we must surely be naturally evolving into less intelligent beings, but it may not be such a bad thing. It is generally intelligent *men* that develop nuclear bombs (and now probably worse weaponry), invade other countries and start wars, embezzle millions, and corrupt our government. Intelligence is not in such high demand now as it was back when we hunted for our food and built our own shelters. We now have things like computers and instruction manuals to do most of our thinking. And if you are wondering who is to design and program those computers and write those instructions, most of that is just routine work not requiring much brainpower, which I

know for a fact by having been directly involved. The illustrious Dr. Torrey of the UMass Botany Department put it somewhat differently in one of his Friday evening philosophy meetings when he observed that successful farming probably requires more brains and general knowledge than does being a rocket scientist."

I have read recently that biologists are now considering the possibility of gene manipulation as a way of improving the intelligence of children, and that some of these studies are even funded by our government. The article I read makes it sound like a good idea, of benefit to all, but I wonder. In addition to my comments in the previous paragraph, intelligence is difficult to define, much less measure. Insects have some forms of intelligence that would put us to shame, and even plants can do smart things that would stump us. Intelligence strikes me as a difficult and possibly dangerous thing for scientists to mess around with, especially in children.

I've had some experience with intelligence tests. In sixth grade we were all given a test to measure our IQ, probably the once common Stanford Binet, which was then used to sort us into four groups, A-B-C-D, for placement in junior high school. Some of my classmates told me what their score was, but I never knew mine. Many of my classmates were children of college professors, and of course they nearly all went into group A. Some of my classmates were children of Polish and Lithuanian farmers and laborers who were not fluent in English and spoke with an accent. Of course many of them went into group D. This was based on a test, not only conducted in English, but with questions involving vocabulary. I trust some reforms have been made by now. Or perhaps better, just discontinue such biased tests.

And then, much later, was the "intelligence" test I and some of my classmates encountered at UMass. Two years of ROTC was a required course for non-veteran men. At the end of our second year, some of us applied for continuing two more years in advanced ROTC. Our thinking was that right after graduation we would probably be drafted anyway, but this way we would be officers and paid accordingly, even while still in school. The downside was that we would probably be sent to Korea, where one of our many wars against "the Communists" was then ongoing, to serve in, of all things, the Quartermaster Corps. We were given a physical exam and intelligence test, both of which I passed. By that time, evidently in their attempt to eliminate the bias in those old intelligence tests involving vocabulary, psychologists had come up with something just as bad, the popular "no fit" question. Given a drawing of four objects, let's say *man*, *dog*, *fish*, *tree*, indicate the one that does not belong. With a little imagination, you could come up with any one of four "correct" answers. But no, the way those questions worked, if you tried to be too creative you failed the test. You were supposed to give the most obvious answer and not try to be too smart. I believe that type of question has thankfully also gone out of style.

Then came an interview conducted by an Army officer. One of the questions I was asked was whether I would later consider a career in the U.S. Army, and my answer was "no." My application was one of the few to be rejected, and I was later told by one of my classmates it was probably because of my honest answer to that one question. Throughout

life, many things that seemed so trivial at the time can change the whole direction of one's life, and here was another example of a single word (see page 2), and in this case I would say again a very lucky word.

Many articles I have read used the terms “Intelligence” and “IQ score” interchangeably, as though they were one and the same, which is of course nonsense. Another troubling point is the frequent use in education of the term “turning someone into another Einstein.” I seriously question if Albert Einstein was any more intelligent than the mechanic who repairs your car or the farmer who grows our vegetables. Einstein appears to have had, more than anything else, a keen imagination, curiosity, and lucky circumstances that favored his specialized brilliant work. But I would not want Einstein running our State Department, removing my appendix, or repairing my plumbing.

I think perhaps what we desperately need now is not smarter but rather better people, meaning simply those who care about others. Knowing Jabe as I did, I think he would have heartily agreed. I forgot to mention Jabe’s religion. He expressed it in just three words: “Goodwill toward mankind.” I go along with that. By the way, I put *men* in italics above. It is men who have caused the most mischief since the beginning of recorded history, and I think perhaps we might be better off if women were now put in charge. Or as my Kazan River partner Norm put it so well, "Our troubles all began with the year around rutting season." And I might add, our herd instinct.

I have a pretty good idea what Jabe might have had to say about seriously unfit persons bearing children. Many of us, myself included, now take pills just to keep ourselves alive. The most recent figures show a \$250 billion a year prescription drug business, with 76% of us taking at least one daily, and an average of four per day, a figure that has doubled in the past 20 years. It is now common to prescribe a second pill to combat the side effects of a previous pill, as has happened to me once and almost a second time. Look at all the ads on TV, and listened to the long list of warnings. In at least four instances, I have been prescribed pills that did more harm than good, and wisely quitting them when I did may have even lengthened my life.

Our life expectancy, after increasing steadily for the past century, has for the past several years been level or even in a decline. The laws of Nature being what they are, it is inevitable that we will continue to evolve into a less fit population unless some drastic changes are made. One has to wonder what the long term prospects are for an increasingly unhealthy population ever more kept alive by artificial means. Might we be headed for a disaster? Also one might question the wisdom of government welfare payments and tax benefits that encourage women, especially the unfit, to have more children. Worse still are laws placing restrictions on abortion, and now even birth control, which ought to be made freely available to any woman, and perhaps mandatory in certain circumstances.

As I write this section in July 2021, we find ourselves in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Just when we thought things were getting better, thanks in part to vaccines, along comes a more infectious mutant, and now yet another even worse. I would have to

assume that when we manage to keep ourselves alive with medicines as we presumably evolve into a less healthy population, there could be a danger of things getting completely out of hand, wiping out a large portion of the human race, or perhaps even entirely. I suppose that Sci-Fi authors have latched onto this idea, although I do not follow that stuff. But does anyone give this serious thought? By the way, might not the same apply to pets and other domestic animals?

So many questions, and so few answers. I am not very comfortable writing about these matters, and even less so about offering any solutions. One has to be careful, especially these days. So I leave it as unfinished business and move on. But sooner or later, all of these issues will need to be addressed.

Part 5, Perspectives

I was conceived in the roaring twenties with my father happily employed by the USDA, but I was born with my father out of work at the beginning of the Great Depression. In my early childhood my father was employed first by one of President Roosevelt's New Deal public works jobs and later self-employed as a photographer of sorts. I was eleven when World War II began abruptly with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, and that war left quite a lasting impression on kids like me. We fashioned war weaponry and played war games, watched war movies, read war books and magazines, and were subjected to much war propaganda, government sponsored or otherwise.

During the war we could not buy fireworks, so some of us ground our own black powder to make firecrackers and other explosives. I even made a cannon from a scrap length of pipe that would fire small projectiles across our driveway at imagined German or Japanese targets. When we made model airplanes, a common sport was to launch them off the flat roof of our house with a firecracker attached to the fuselage, to be blown to pieces in midair. Even to this day I am intrigued by the thought of things crashing down or being blown to smithereens by explosives, and I find I am far from alone. In a related matter, I have always eagerly looked forward to extremities of weather such as record snowstorms, violent thunderstorms, or even hurricanes. A friend once told me how lucky he had been on a recent cruise to get back into port just ahead of a hurricane, and I think he was in disbelief when I told him I would have paid extra to be on a cruise ship in the middle of one. I wonder how much all of this can be traced back to my wartime childhood. And then I have to wonder about all the other wars since then and all the other children who may have been similarly influenced, not to mention all the simulated video war games now eagerly played by them to the level of obsession.

Except for the over 400,000 U.S. military deaths and many more wounded, we people in the U.S. did not suffer many hardships during the war. Indeed, jobs were plentiful, the pay was good, and the rationing of food and fuel was only a minor inconvenience. The U.S. is one of only a few major countries in the world that have never directly experienced mainland attack. I wonder if perhaps that might explain why, in recent years, the U.S. has blithely engaged in far more wars than any other country, and in fact starting many of them. Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria are some that immediately come to mind. As reported by the Watson Institute at Brown University, in just the past three years, the U.S. military has conducted air strikes in 7 countries, engaged in combat in 8 countries, and conducted counterterrorism operations in 85 countries all over the world. But for what purpose? Many of these were in reaction to the 9/11 attack in which 2,996 Americans died. Our misdirected and disproportioned response has resulted in over a million deaths of mostly innocent civilians. We will never know how many in Iran died of starvation and are still dying as the result of U.S. sanctions deliberately design to cripple the country, but counting just children alone it is estimated to be between 500,000 and 700,000 deaths and still ongoing. This has been termed genocide by former UN official Denis Halliday. And all that because of our country's panic over-reaction to 9/11? How should that make us feel as Americans?

From 1998 to 2005, I spent two weeks every year biking all over Western Europe with Elderhostel, accompanied by Mary Dow. The program was partly educational, with speakers and visits usually including the history of the seven countries we visited. One of our companions was a professor of history, and I remarked to him one time that our history lessons for these various countries seem to have been mostly about when they were invaded and by whom, or how they avoided being invaded, or when they invaded another country, or were overthrown from within, and so on. He agreed with me that it was unfortunate to give so much attention to that instead of culture and the arts, but on the other hand, that seems to have dominated the history of Europe and many other parts of the world until recently. Perhaps it for that reason that Western European countries are now less inclined than our Pentagon to seek military solutions to international problems.

In the news recently, there has been some disagreement among politicians about which country is now our greatest threat. Some say Russia, while others name China or North Korea. No one seems to mention the United States, yet that would be my first choice. There have been one or two incidents where one of our own hydrogen bombs has nearly been accidentally detonated within the U.S., possibly killing millions as well as precipitating a global nuclear war. And then there is the possibility of a hopelessly deranged President, as we have recently lived through and luckily survived (so far at least), launching a nuclear war. Our Vice President also now has that capability, which I did not realize until it was reported that Pence was very nearly captured by the January 6 Capitol invasion mob while carrying that dreaded device. Just think of the possible consequences of that.

Here is something that has long puzzled me. If we were to come under nuclear attack, it is said that our military has only seconds to decide how to respond, and whom to aim our nuclear missiles at. I remember well the Cuban missile crisis. Back then it was just the USSR. But now, many countries have nuclear weapons, and possibly soon even international terrorists. There are many ways such bombs could be brought into the U.S. undetected and detonated in one or more of our cities. So do we launch a counterattack at the one enemy most suspect, or worse still, at several?

To carry this one step further, given the ever increasing sophistication of cyber warfare, what is there to prevent some terrorist group, even within the U.S., from tricking our military into launching an attack against ourselves? Crazy idea? That's what we might have thought of terrorists invading and momentarily taking over our Capitol and trying to overthrow our government until it actually happened.

If I were a candidate for President of the United States, my platform would include the eventual elimination of our entire nuclear stockpile. Of course you will say that would eliminate all my chances of being elected or even nominated. Probably so, but I like to imagine that sanity just might prevail someday. But then, some will ask, wouldn't that make our country a more dangerous place? I have often vacationed in Canada, which has no nuclear weapons. So according to that reasoning, I guess Canada must be a very dangerous place to be. But then I can name about a dozen other countries I have visited,

likewise all too dangerous, so best stay home? It strikes me that in World War III, the countries having nuclear weapons would most likely be wiping out each other, but alas with radioactivity a threat to others nearby. I think I might choose to be living in Iceland or the South Seas. On second thought, who would want to survive amidst such a nightmare? As for our nuclear weapons, they may be discarded sometime in the future, not for the reason of sanity but rather from having been superseded by even more deadly weaponry, but let's not even try to imagine what.

As I write this, the country is seeing a surge in gun violence. The "liberal" branch of our government is calling for more restrictive laws governing firearms, while the "conservative" branch, which unabashedly accepts bribes from the NRA, opposes them. I have mixed feelings about this. I have in the past owned a .22 rifle, 12 gauge shot gun, and .22 revolver, but I no longer have use for any of them and do not miss them. In my childhood, nearly all of my friends had access to the family .22 rifle, and we used them responsibly for hunting or target practice. We were all taught to never aim a gun at another person, whether loaded or not. My father told how he and his classmates brought their rifles to school and stacked them in the hallway, to be used for hunting on their way home.

Recently I tried to count the number of TV channels that at any one moment show assailants brandishing guns, often the military assault type, and gleefully shooting at each other, but after about a dozen I gave up counting. The sight of it is so disgusting, I would hope the advertisers supporting such mayhem would find their products shunned by the public. Or if only the networks would show more responsibility. I know it is a complicated problem with no easy solutions, and probably beyond the capacity of our present government to address effectively. But then, sometimes forgotten, we *are* the government. So why not make at least a start by boycotting the advertisers who support those most insanely violent shows, and likewise the films. Just a thought.

Before the Covid pandemic gained top priority in the evening news on TV last year, the lead headline was often mass shootings of children or the killing of police by crazed men with guns. This was of course accompanied by calls for more laws, especially governing the manufacture and sale of assault weaponry, routinely supported by Democrats but opposed by Republicans and the NRA, with predictably in the end nothing being done.

In response to the recent epidemic of mass shootings in our public schools, several states now allow teachers to be armed, and one state even requires having an assault rifle in each school. Will those teachers be trained in use of guns? Even the police sometimes make deadly mistakes in spite of training. Just suppose a suspicious person is seen lurking near school. Teacher grabs a gun and calls police, who rush to the scene and spot someone holding a gun. Just imagine the possible consequences.

Way back in 1965, "recognizing the urgency of the Nation's crime problem and the depth of ignorance about it," President Johnson established a commission "to investigate the causes of crime." I bought a copy of that 351-page GPO report when it came out in 1967, studied it, and summarized it in a report of my own. I seem to have lost or misplaced both

my copy and the report, so I have recently bought another copy, but this time of the ponderous 814-page reprint by Avon Books, and am doing it all over again. The two quotes above are from the Forward and Introduction of that Avon reprint. I certainly do not purport to be an expert on the subject and hesitate to even make suggestions, so what I am doing instead is calling attention to and commenting on a few excerpts from the report, and you can draw your own conclusions. Page numbers of the Avon edition are in parentheses.

Reduce crime by combating poverty (19). I grew up during the Great Depression in a poor farming community where we and many of our neighbors could not even afford to own a car, next to a Polish and Lithuanian neighborhood that was even poorer. Yet crime was not much of a problem. There are further references to crime “flourishing in poverty,” but then paradoxically it is reported that crime “flourishes in conditions of affluence,” (88) but with no recommendation on how to combat that either. The report says climate may have something to do with crime, but again with no explanation or recommendations (113), likewise, believe it or not, inflation (118).

Strengthen the police force (113). We had no police presence or patrol in North Amherst Village all the 20 years I lived there and managed quite well without it. UMass had only one policeman when I went there, who was seen mostly collecting tickets at sporting events. I don’t recall any crimes being committed. My father kept all his photographic equipment in an unlocked room and never had anything stolen. Now I believe there are about 25 cops, and I expect most such rooms are kept locked.

There are many more references to “slums,” “slum life,” “poverty,” and “socially disorganized,” too numerous to reference, and even “dilapidated school buildings” (196). Put up new school buildings and crime will decrease? I think that may have already been tried. As for poverty breeding crime, the worst criminals in recent history – Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Franco – were anything but poor. Likewise in our own country, the Mafia, Winter Hill Gang, Capone. For minor crimes like shoplifting, I can see where there might be a correlation with poverty, but for the really major crimes there would appear to be an inverse relationship. The report also attempts to correlate crime with density of the inner city, which comes as no surprise, but missing is any explanation of cause and effect, or especially what to do about it.

Most discouraging to me was the recommendation of more security devices, such as better and stronger locks (118), improved alarm systems (553), faster response time (558), and even more and better street lights (587). Many pages are devoted to this. Were the authors giving up getting at the roots of the problem and throwing in the towel? Shouldn’t we instead be striving for the exact opposite - how to make a better world in which such things are unnecessary? I would even go so far as to suggest that the ever-increasing, and even accelerating, need for protection of persons and property be taken as a rough measure of the misdirection we are now headed, as expressed so clearly in this disappointing report.

Another lamentable aspect of the report was the calling for ever more laws. Recently I tried to determine how many laws governing us are now on the books. I decided to skip local and state, and concentrate on only federal. To further narrow it down, I limited my search to only criminal laws. I found that in 1982, the Justice Department tried to count them, and after a search that lasted for two years they gave it up as hopeless. So instead, they tried to count the number of federal crimes and finally came up with a list of about 3000. But that was 37 years ago, and the list grows every year.

As for the Massachusetts General Laws, again the total number of them is evidently uncountable. However, I remember once being in a law office when the shelves along one wall were presumably filled with them all nicely bound in thick books. There must have been nearly 100,000 pages, and if a few pages for each law, at least 10,000 laws. But that is only my very rough estimate.

I would think that the object ought to be reducing and consolidating this huge multiplicity of laws rather than adding to the confusion. I can understand how some rules and regulations are useful and perhaps even necessary, such as license plates and right-of-way at intersections. But why do we need laws against things like theft and murder? My friends and I have never robbed a bank, not because it is against the law, but because it is wrong. Can you imagine a time in the distant future when we might be able to do away completely with criminal laws? Crazy idea, some will say. But keep in mind that our distant ancestors lived and managed in such a world for ages with no written laws and no justice system. Ah, but all that was so long ago, some will say. Wrong again. My companions and I spent many happy summer vacations living in just such a place. For me at least, that peaceful world was part of the appeal of our canoe travels in the Far North.

To carry this one step further, on our travels in the wilderness there is the idea of being governed for a brief while only by ourselves. Worldwide, I would estimate well over one hundred million persons are involved in governing the rest of us. Valerie and I enjoy observing from our screened porch all the wildlife in the nearby field and woods – the birds, bees, butterflies, and animals - all of which seem to be managing well enough without being governed. So why not us too? Oh well, for a start, none of them are capable of making weapons of mass destruction, generating mountains of waste, and changing our climate. Perhaps it is best to just accept being governed to such extreme. Yet in my old age I can't resist reflecting on the idea of a much saner world waiting somewhere out there, hence the title of this piece.

Getting back to the report, I searched for some concrete recommendations on how to reduce crime but found none. Nor did I really expect to find any. Most everything in the report is watered down and politically correct. One question I might like to have seen addressed is whether there is any genetic predisposition to committing crime. The answer the report indirectly gives to this is clearly yes. Certain serious crimes such as armed robbery are committed more by men than by women, in a ratio of at least ten to one. (For the recent surge of mass shootings, the ratio is more like thirty to one.) Others have a marked racial or ethnic correlation. But then they carry these findings no further by avoiding getting involved in the reasons why. Likewise are page after page of tables

breaking down incidence of various crimes by location, income, education, ethnicity, race, and so on, but again not a single word on the significance of all these findings by experts. Too sensitive to deal with, I guess. By the way, the 19 members of the Commission had nothing to do with creating the report and, as in the 9-11 Commission, they were prominent persons named just to give the report the appearance of respectability.

Now we come to the more than double sized Avon edition, edited by Isidore Silver. His 20-page *Introduction* is a scathing criticism of the report. He reiterates many of the issues I have raised, far more articulately than I, and also raises many others. Then he digs even more deeply in his 82-page *Afterword* at the end of this edition. I doubt if many would want to waste their time reading this entire mostly useless report, but I do recommend Silver's expert contributions. He even raises the issue of possible *inherited* predisposition to criminal behavior (713). I have not been able to learn anything about Isidore Silver, but I'm sure he was not a professor at a place like Harvard University, where the use of that term might even get one fired. And credit Avon Books for publishing this report and then having the honesty to include criticism of the contents of their own book.

When I read the Crime Commission recommendations for more police, more tools for fighting crime, more enforcement, more prison time for some, stronger locks, I have to ask: where are we heading? I would think the ultimate goal ought to be the exact opposite. Work on ways to eventually eliminate the need for police, prisons, and security devices, with the eventual goal of doing away with them. I know it will not happen in my lifetime, or even for long after, but hopefully someday. Why keep going blindly in the ruinous opposite direction? Why not at least try? I have tried to do my part. I don't think I have ever done anything that required action by the police or the criminal justice system, and I don't believe any of my children or grandchildren have either. It is something I would like to encourage and pass along.

The possible inheritance of violent criminal tendencies in human males is a subject that has been studied as far back as the 19th century. More recently it has received the attention of scientists trained in modern genetics. The following is taken from a presumably reliable recent NIH report:

Conventional criminal behavior has typically been associated with prefrontal cortex (PFC) structural aberrations and functional impairments ([Brower & Price, 2001](#); [Yang & Raine, 2009](#)). The PFC is considered the seat of higher-level cognitive processes such as decision-making, attention, emotion regulation, impulse control, and moral reasoning ([Sapolsky, 2004](#)). In healthy adults, larger prefrontal structures have been associated with better executive functioning ([Yuan & Raz, 2014](#)). However, structural deficits and functional impairments of the PFC have been observed in antisocial and criminal individuals, suggesting that PFC aberrations may underlie some of the observed behaviors.

Many years ago it was common practice to sterilize the criminally insane, but it is no longer done, at least in the U.S. The intention was good and the idea probably sound, but the big problem was identifying the right ones to do while avoiding the many obvious pitfalls. Modern science is now able to positively identify certain types of inheritable pathological brain defects having to do with the frontal lobe leading to violent criminal behavior, so perhaps this practice will be reconsidered. In the same vein, the suggestion is

sometimes made that persons convicted and imprisoned for habitually committing sadistic crimes be prevented from having offspring, but don't expect to find this idea in any government report or academic study.

It would appear to me that persons are sent to prison for one of two reasons: punishment or danger to the public. I have doubts that it was ever a very satisfactory form of punishment, and certainly even less so now that prison life is being made ever more pleasant. Surely there must be more effective and less expensive ways of punishment. I can think of several – use your imagination. As for danger to the public, if really so, why not keep that type locked up permanently?

Again getting back to that President Johnson crime commission report, at a cost of probably millions, the good news is that it is now generally forgotten and ends up in the trash heap of history. If another such study is undertaken by our government, perhaps try a different approach. Instead of involving lawyers, law enforcement, and politicians, consider instead making more use of scientists, doctors and the like with a background in the pathology of criminal behavior.

One more observation before I close this chapter. Every purchase or other financial transaction I now make has to be protected with secret code numbers or other similar measures to prevent theft, which sad to say have not always been successful. I have had to change my credit card twice recently. Today I deleted a couple dozen messages in my Spam Folder that had accumulated in the last day or two, most of which appeared to be from crooks lurking somewhere out there and trying to victimize me. There are more all the time now. If I plot a graph against time of such threats, or better still actual incidents including those reported by family and friends, it is a curve that starts out near zero for the first half of my life, bends gradually upward, but now ever more steeply up. If this trend continues, and I see nothing stopping it, our grandchildren will be living in a world in which, probably for the first time in the recorded history of mankind, crime and the avoidance of it become the dominant features of life. Is this the kind of world we want to pass along to them? It will be unless some drastic changes are made.

Statistics kept by the FBI for decades are reported to show a steady decrease in overall crime. Clearly these reports do not accurately reflect such things as credit card and Internet theft, which are rapidly on the rise and are seldom if ever reported to the FBI, not to mention crimes committed by our government itself, possibly even including the FBI.

Part 6, Some Random Thoughts

Olympic Games

Here, for a change, are some comments of a lighter note. First, about the Olympic Games, now going on in Tokyo and reported at or near the top of every newscast. The first time I watched them was the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, which I remember well because we had just acquired our first TV, so Jane and I watched it with our children, as would anyone with that new novelty. I remember being appalled by the emphasis on nationalism rather than performance, even further accentuated in the TV coverage. At a subsequent event, the network news opened with the announcement of “bad news” from the Olympics. No, not because someone died or was injured. Rather it was because a superb Russian athlete had outperformed all other contestants, including of course our cherished Americans. Nothing has changed for the better; if anything just the opposite. I would prefer to see all national identifications, symbols, flags, and such completely eliminated from the Olympics but instead concentrate on the athletes and their performance, although I realize the chances of it ever happening are close to nil.

Small Change

When I was a lad, one cent would buy lots of neat things—a postcard or a postage stamp for it, a small candy bar, chewing gum, or a balsawood glider. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, inflation has increased nearly twenty-fold from 1940 to 2021. According to this same source, our 1940 penny became the equivalent of the current nickel in 1979. It seems to me, back then would have been the logical time to stop minting pennies, if not sooner. And then by 1992, our money had decreased to one-tenth its value, so why not discontinue the nickel too? In 1940 we managed very well without half-cents or tenth-cents.

It was recently reported that the penny costs the U.S. Mint 1.25 cents to produce. What an incredible waste, and what a deadweight nuisance in our nearly obsolete change purses. Most people no longer use them, and few even stoop to pick them up. Why doesn't Congress do something about it? It's a question I've been asking for the past thirty years. Every so often the matter comes up and polls are taken of public opinion. One I remember many years ago ran about two to one against eliminating the penny, and of course eliminating the nickel wasn't even considered. A recent poll I saw ran closer to even.

The usual foolish argument against it is that consumer prices would then be rounded up. Hard to imagine where that idea comes from. Just look around. Consumer prices are never rounded up. Exactly the opposite. My various business enterprises were the rare exception. I always felt that a price such as \$9.99 was an insult to the customer's intelligence. Collective Copies, to their credit, rounded both of my books to whole dollars. I thought I had an understanding with Heron Dance to do the same with my canoeing book, but then they went back on it and listed it at \$19.95. Then there was the time Jane and I were shopping for some household item at Sears while dealing with a glib salesman. When Jane asked the price of some item, I looked at the tag and told her a hundred dollars. The clerk immediately corrected me and said "only \$99.95." Perhaps it

was his idea of salesmanship, but I took it as more of an insult. I suppose, on the overall scale of national and world problems, my penny crusade would not rank near the top of the list. But on the other hand, it would be so easy for Congress to fix.

Added thought inserted June 2022: Inflation is very much in the T-V network news right now, especially the "skyrocketing" (their term, not mine) cost of gasoline. But believe it or not, the cost of gas per mile is slightly less now than what it was when I got my driver's license in 1949. The inflation adjusted price of \$4.50 per gallon is less than twice what it was then, but cars are getting about twice the miles per gallon, so we may actually come out slightly ahead. To make matters worse, in reaction to the public clamor, President Biden is now proposing a "temporary" suspension of the gas tax, which might even increase consumption when just the opposite is called for, not to mention the unsolved problem of funding the lost revenue. And imagine the uproar when and if his suspension were ever to be ended, which by the way could not take place during an election year.

Around 1958, when I was a member of the Sierra Club, the newsletter carried an editorial calling for cars with better gas mileage. At the time, I was commuting to work on Route 2, which was becoming ever more crowded. Accordingly, I wrote a "Letter to the Editor" pointing out that this could backfire by encouraging more people to drive more, with more congestion on our already overcrowded highways and possibly even more use and waste of gas. I proposed instead a doubling of the gas tax, and I think that might be an even better idea now. My letter was never acknowledged.

Income Tax

Each year, millions of us face the dismal ordeal of filling out page after confusing page of state and federal income tax forms or paying someone else to do it, only then to wonder if something will be found wrong. It involves countless millions of essentially wasted hours, not to mention stress and depression. There ought to be a better way. Many candidates for Federal office promise to simplify the process, yet they never do. Quite the opposite. The Federal tax code never shrinks but always increases. It started out as 400 pages in 1913. It is now 75,000 pages, and projected to exceed 100,000 pages by 2050, not to mention the many millions of pages of interpretation by the courts.

Just a suggestion: Require all members of Congress to prepare their own tax returns. We might then see some big reforms. But alas, how to get such a law enacted. Here is another idea. Reduce personal income tax instructions to a single page, the tax simply a certain percentage of income on a graduated scale same as now, but with no deductions for anything. Perhaps make the income and amount paid by every citizen and business a public record. Whenever I have suggested this, my friends ask how we would make up for the huge loss of revenue. I am not so sure there would be any. But yes, I know, probably impractical. My gross income last year was \$72, 187, yet I paid only \$4,841 in federal income tax, which comes to 6.7%. I have long felt that I am not paying my fair amount. At least think about these things and try to come up with some better plans.

OK, so that might be considered just whimsy. Here is a more practical idea: Do away completely with our even more complicated Massachusetts tax forms and make it just a fraction of one's Federal tax. I believe some states may already do this, so why not Massachusetts? What a huge savings of time, labor, and expense.

Budget and National Defense

In college we all took the customary required course in economics. All I remember now, 70 years later, is Prof. K. trying to explain to us dumb-heads the difference between fiscal and monetary policy, little of which I understood back then and none of which I have retained now. So I am anything but expert on the subject. Nevertheless I have some ideas to share. In my suggestions above on simplifying income tax payments, I realize it might result in a shortfall, so how might we make up for it?

Before we get into that, in my research I find that our federal government nearly always spends more than it takes in, resulting in a deficit that this year will be about \$1.6 trillion, to be added to our present debt of about \$30.6 trillion. I could never understand how we can continue to spend more than we take in. I can't do that, and neither can my town or state government. Doesn't that inevitably lead to inflation? (Or perhaps even worse.) Furthermore I wonder how this imbalance can not only increase every year but even the rate of increase can be allowed to increase. In my vision of an ideal world, we would commit ourselves to a balanced budget. So how might we reduce spending and control inflation?

(Added note inserted June 2022. The above paragraph, warning of rampant upcoming inflation, was written in late 2021. Right now we are suddenly seeing exactly that, which even our Secretary of the Treasury and other presumed experts both in and out of government did not foresee coming, but instead now blame the Russians, Covid-19, or anything else.)

Let's start with the military budget, presently over 700 billion (not counting possible secret programs) and increasing every year. How about greatly reducing our military, and perhaps even doing away with parts of it such as the infantry and cavalry. What purpose do they now serve except to invade other countries and get ourselves into trouble? No one is likely to invade us. Perhaps keep the National Guard, as they sometimes do useful things in a national emergency. By the way, why did we spent a trillion dollars invading and occupying Afghanistan for two decades, only to leave it worse off than before?

And then there is the Navy. I am no expert on military strategy, in fact far from it, but why do we keep building bigger and more expensive battleship and carriers? What purpose other than symbolic could they possibly serve, and how long would they survive as a future easy target of long range missiles? On second thought, why would an enemy even bother to sink them if they are not causing any harm? Oh, I almost forgot. Those ships are made in the home district of some member of Congress, who by the way readily and unabashedly accepts bribes (contributions) from the ship-building company, and you vote for his wasteful bill because he in turn promises to support yours. This is no joke.

That is the way our rotten system now works. There is a simple cure, a one-term limit, but it has zero chance of passing in our present crooked Congress.

Back on page 21 I suggested eventually getting rid of our entire nuclear arsenal. The whole idea was to make us safer. But then there is also the cost to consider. There is now a proposal, possibly already underway, to upgrade our nuclear weapons at a reported cost of nearly a trillion dollars. Aside from the danger, what a colossal waste. Next I would target NASA, presently \$25 billion and likewise growing every year. How much of that is exploration of outer space, even futilely looking for life out there? There is now even said to be a million dollar government funded study of how to deal with an invasion of aliens from outer space, believe it or not.

Added note: NASA has just released "exciting news" of the first photos of deepest outer space sent back by the new Webb telescope. So just what wonders did they discover out there? More galaxies of course, at a cost of around \$10 billion.

Medicare now costs the U.S. Treasury about one trillion dollars a year. Now there is another opportunity for big savings. Why not at least reduce benefits to smokers. Besides saving our treasury billions, it would improve the health of our nation by coaxing at least a few smokers to quit, thereby also relieving some of us non-smokers from that horrible unhealthy stench. Another idea - reduce food stamps for the obese. Again there would be a double benefit, reducing cost and at the same time improving the nation's health. A third idea - encourage able-bodied persons on welfare to get at least a part time job. At this moment, there are millions of job openings waiting to be filled. Our local schools are even having to bring in the National Guard to drive busses. There is ever more litter along roads and sidewalks needing to be picked up; likewise a rapidly increasing invasion of vines needing to be removed before they kill ever more of our beautiful shade trees. So those could be just a start to get us in the spirit of a rational national economy.

(Another added note: A \$740 billion 755 page massive spending bill called the "Inflation Reduction Act" has just been passed by Congress. I think it much more likely to do just the opposite. It may do many good things, but the name is a joke. I have just attempted to read the entire bill, but it is a hopeless exercise. There are sub, sub-sub, etc. heading all the way up to sub-sub-sub-sub-sub. Many contain references to other documents meaningless to most of us, such as the following typical sub (H):

(H) Section 6655(g)(1)(A) is amended by 10 redesignating clauses (ii) and (iii) as clauses 11 (iii) and (iv), respectively, and by inserting 12 after clause (i) the following new clause: 13 “(ii) the tax imposed by section 55,”. 14

There are 124 pages of just the one section giving our government the power to regulate drug prices. How many members of Congress do you suppose read this bill before voting on it? Probably none. Read it if you wish and draw your own conclusions. Or do what our members of Congress probably do and hire someone to read it for you. In promoting this bill, there was a table showing \$300 billion going toward reducing our national debt. I can't find that anywhere in the bill itself but I may have overlooked it. The national

deficit this year will be about \$1.6 trillion. So please explain to me how a mere \$300 billion is going to even balance the budget, much less reduce the national debt. I barely passed that introductory college course in economics already mentioned, but are these basic matters really that difficult to fathom?

Waiting for the Silver Lining

I happened to be watching TV on the morning of September 11, 2001, when the news broke of the attack. For a long time I had been expecting something of this sort might happen. After I had recovered somewhat from the shock of seeing both towers come down and had time to reflect, I wondered if there could possibly be a silver lining to the whole thing. It might even mark a monumental turning point in history. What an opportune time it would be for some new political party with a sense of values to rise to the occasion and lead the nation in a totally new and different direction. Or perhaps there might even be a few with a sense of honor somewhere within that present administration, who would emerge from the shadows. What if the U.S. were to now embark upon a complete reversal of the present ruinous foreign policy, especially the longstanding contempt for the Arab world and lust for their oil going all the way back to the Roosevelt administration, and instead strive for a goal of goodwill toward all peoples. Instead of shipping weapons to countries all over the world, send much needed food and medical supplies, and especially birth control.

Alas, that was all wishful thinking. The Bush administration, to no one's surprise I suppose, continued headlong in exactly the opposite direction. Another golden opportunity lost. I try to remain optimistic, but I shudder to think what it might take to finally shock our country and our government into changing course if even 9/11 couldn't.

As I write this, we are coming up on the 20th anniversary of that attack, an event that will long be remembered in our nation's history. When the 9/11 Commission Report came out, I hastened to our library, where I found their one copy prominently on display at the front desk begging for readers. I spent months doing research and writing my own five-page report of that 582-page report. I can boil it down here in a few words. Parts of it read more like a Zionist propaganda paper. Read either the Report or my report on it, which will soon be found on my website, and decide for yourself. Subsequently there have been several other damning reviews, see especially the one by Philip Shenon.

One of the most shocking revelations to come out of the Iraq War, worse in my opinion than the war itself, was the routine secret torture of prisoners by the CIA and boastfully joked about by Donald Rumsfeld. In a TV interview, Commission chairman Kean praised his Report for coming out against torture, evidently never having even read his own Report, which did not surprise me. See page 379.

The Report describes itself as "nonpartisan, yet there was not a single nonpartisan member on the Commission, five being Republicans and five Democrats. Four were present or former members of Congress, yet they were willing to sign their names to this dreadful report that, in effect, justifies over half a century of subjugation bordering on

genocide of the Palestinian people by the Israeli military, with arms, support, and encouragement provided by the United States.

I have always believed that the overwhelming majority of people are honest, caring, trustworthy, and decent. Our founders must have assumed that when they set up our government "by the people." Obviously something has gone terribly wrong, but what to do about it? First, how about ending all campaign "contributions," or at least the ones amounting to bribes? Beyond that, I wonder if we might be better off if our representatives were selected by lot, as presumably in our jury system, and also do away altogether with "parties." This might be done at the local voting district level. Then they could choose from among themselves to serve on the state legislature, which could in turn choose from among itself for Congress. Oh well, just a thought. Do you have something better? Of course the hitch is how could any reform like that ever become enacted? As for parties, no business, industry, foundation, city or town, or other similar organization that I know of is or could be run properly by two opposing parties constantly vying with each other for power and control. So why then our Affairs of State?

I hope no one will be shocked or offended by these remarks of mine about the present state of affairs in our government. It is always easier to find fault than to praise. I know there are many fine people serving in our government who care about our country and are trying their best to find some way out of the present chaos. More than ever, they need our admiration and support.

Part 7, Final Words

So many crazy ideas, like doing away with criminal laws or the military. But don't worry, I will not be running for public office, and even if I did, not likely to be elected. Think of it all as just food for thought, and then try to come up with some better ideas. Almost anything but the present might be an improvement.

I started writing this in June 2021, just after my 91st birthday. And now I finish it just after my 92nd. I do not expect to be writing much more. I think I have done enough, and perhaps even too much, some might say. In looking back over the previous chapter, I regret that so much of it turns out to be written in the negative. But let's face it, that's the way things are right now, at least from my viewpoint. There is much hard work to be done. I know there are a great many public spirited citizens out there who are trying to do just that, but the obstacles they face are daunting, and they too need more help and support. I like to think of myself as basically an optimist, but you might wonder from reading parts of this report. So many of what I would consider indicators of progress are now headed in the opposite direction. I wonder what it might take to stop this downward spiral.

Thankfully, we do still have the power to vote, if only we would use it more for the good of all rather than in self-interest, with a *long term* goal of a better world, free of crime, violence, and warfare, but instead based on a religion that earlier in this essay I attributed to Jabe: "Goodwill toward mankind." But how does one foster and encourage altruism? Perhaps we should not expect too much help from our Federal government, because it does not seem to be working that way now, with the two parties preoccupied by opposing each other for control. So right now, it is really up to us, The People.

I have always loved my country, and in most ways I still do. In my travels to foreign lands, I have often reflected on how lucky I am to have been born in America. People have been coming here from all over the world for a better life, and they keep coming. After saving the world, at the loss of over 400,000 American soldiers during WW2, we took the lead in reconstructing and feeding the ravaged countries, even including our former enemies. The Marshall Plan and the Berlin Airlift - I remember them well. Our government started the World Food Program and later the Peace Corps, plus many other such humanitarian organizations, not to mention all the many privately funded ones. We were instrumental in forming the United Nations and the Human Rights Commission. I think perhaps those were our best years, certainly within my lifetime.

Sometimes I can't resist the tendency to write nostalgically about times past. I have produced some books along those lines including *The Good Earth's Bounty* and *Tall Trees and Wild Bees*, plus a few shorter works. Yet I know it is futile to expect a return to those wonderful days of old. Those of my generation, having lived through some of the best of times, are especially having trouble adjusting to this present turmoil, as we watch our beloved country descend into unprecedented civil and political disorder. I guess we all need to try being optimistic and keep striving to make things better. After all, there is really no other choice. At least that is the way I see things.