

Commentary

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As year closes, a look at history hints at things to come

Whether we review the one palindromic year of the 21st century backward or forward, it is hard to find comfort or joy in the doings of humankind. Still, some small points of ironic light flicker in the gloom.



For example, the White House is trying hard to see to it that if and when the all-but-forgotten American meek inherit

the Earth, they won't have to pay much in estate taxes. In the here and now, those gathered around the White House Christmas tree see the plumpest sugar plums dancing in a repeal of the estate tax. Heirs of the defense and commerce secretaries and the president himself would be more than \$150 million richer.

Tax cuts already in place amount to an average of \$45,000 per year for the top 1 percent of taxpayers. As recently reported in the *Detroit News*, that's almost enough to buy a \$71,865 Ford Land Rover Range Rover after a "light truck" tax write-off of \$21,560.

The bottom 20 percent, aka the meek, average a \$5 benefit, or a discount Hot Wheels car for the kids. We can understand then why *The Wall Street Journal* calls low-income workers "lucky

duckies."

Locally, the year began with University of Texas President Larry Faulkner taking a hard look at the university's budgetary picture, prudently worrying about projected deficits and working hard to generate enough revenue for the state's flagship institution to follow the regental plans for Texas higher education outlined under the leadership of our current U.S. Secretary of Commerce. Faulkner's plan for moderate fee increases structured to protect truly needy students was nixed by our newest U.S. senator, who used to be our state attorney general.

The new UT system chancellor Mark Yudof has similar salmon instincts. Swimming against the political stream reflected in his own CEO-style compensation package, Yudof has publicly contemplated offering free education to our state's neediest students while setting tuition at rates competitive with peer state university systems.

Yudof's plan-in-the-making is consistent with the promotion of unfettered capitalism now in vogue, because it removes the artificially maintained, anti-free-market low tuition that benefits the well-to-do. It also recognizes the dire economic consequences for us all if we leave our poorest citizens poorly educated.

We should hope that something like Yudof's plan makes it all the way upstream. Stranger things have happened. Policies that president No. 41 once derided as "voodoo economics" now prevail under president No. 43 and already have the chosen among us tasting of milk and honey.

The fly in the milk is the phrase "chosen among us." People always have a tendency to think that they and theirs will be on Santa's or salvation's list. Americans are no exception. Our government is asserting our moral rectitude and our right unilaterally to pursue our own interests. If you have ever read the moral tale of the Greek historian Thucydides, our policies and policy-makers would make you uneasy.

So it was mind-boggling to read an October story in the *American-Statesman* that one of the most influential champions of aggressive U.S. foreign policy is Donald Kagan, Sterling professor of history at Yale and author of a multivolume commentary on Thucydides. Kagan has declared, "You saw the movie 'High Noon'? We're Gary Cooper."

It was precisely this kind of self-deluding cultural arrogance and abandonment of restraint that destroyed the democracy of ancient Athens from which our Founding Fathers

derived many of our fundamental cultural values.

Thucydides explains the tragedy of Athens with clear and surgical precision. I asked several Vietnam veterans who seriously study Thucydides how it was possible for Kagan to come up with the 'High Noon' line. They could only think that he had never fought in a war himself.

The world now is a terrifying place. So it is naturally comforting to believe that we who wield the biggest stick no longer have to talk softly or invite others to walk along with us.

My own fears are rooted in Herodotus, the father of history. His account of the Persian Wars surveys a millennium of reasons for conflict between western and eastern culture. The rift has now widened over another two and a half millennia. We see it in Israel and Palestine, in Afghanistan and Iraq, in Kenya, Nigeria and Bali and in Lower Manhattan.

This point was driven home in a three-hour seminar with Khaled Abou El Fadl in the UT Humanities Institute last spring. El Fadl is a devout expert in Islamic law and comes from a long line of jurists who studied at the Al Azhar mosque in Cairo. He has taken what is tantamount to refuge at UCLA, where, as an academic version of Salman

Rushdie, he is a target of death threats for uttering opinions inconsistent with Islamic fundamentalism.

As a pious scholar of the Quran and the sayings and life of the prophet Muhammad, El Fadl maintains that God's laws — the only kind of laws there are in Islamic countries — must be clearly derivable from sacred texts. For example, El Fadl argues that there is no divine justification for women's faces to be covered all the time.

Silencing of intellectual diversity within Islam, El Fadl said, is being furthered by lavish gifts from Saudi sources to institutions of higher education in the United States, Europe and the Middle East. This has the effect of quashing — or buying off — even conservative interpretations of Islamic law that differ from the prevailing virulent fundamentalism.

Money and arrogance and zealotry, then, would seem to be three roots of a good deal of evil in the east and the west. We should thank our Founding Fathers for the healthy doses of humanism they used to keep our country free, so far, of the tyranny of wealth, power and religion. And we should be vigilant about preserving our time-honored humanist ideals.

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