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 can 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 departments are dancing in a repeal of the estate tax. In the here and now, the doings of humankind. Still, some 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 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, Afghanistan, Iraq, 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 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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