

commentary

from other pens...

Martin Van Buren and the golden spoon

Once upon a time there was an American president of regal ambitions and imperial tastes who gave the White House the trappings of a royal palace while lapping up lavish desserts with a golden spoon.

So said the enemies of Martin Van Buren. Even worse, they added, all of these presidential fripperies were paid for "with The People's Cash." Worse still, they said, the money had been spent during a severe economic slump.

The case against Van Buren's alleged extravagance was made by Rep. Charles Ogle of Pennsylvania during a daylong speech on April 14, 1840. It may have been the most venomous, vituperative and downright insulting attack ever leveled against a chief executive from the floor of Congress.

Ogle's oration hurled every gilded chair, mirror and imported plate in the White House inventory straight at Van Buren's head. It is reprinted in the spring issue of "White House History," the journal of the White House Historical Association.

Ogle led the House on a rhetorical tour of alleged Van Buren extravagance, from exotic blooms in the White House gardens through all of the mansion's rooms, not excepting the Blue Room, which he repeatedly called the president's "Blue Elliptical Saloon."

Reaching the State Dining Room, Ogle followed Van Buren's progress through an apparently endless round of lavish banquets, building up to these much quoted lines:

"What, sir, will the honest (Democrat) say to Mr. Van Buren for spending the People's Cash in foreign Fanny Kemble green finger cups in which to wash his pretty, tapering, softwhite, lily fingers after dining on fricandeau de veau and omelette soufflé?"

Congress dare not, the congressman said, approve a \$3,665 appropriation for "alterations and repairs" at the White House lest Van Buren use the money "for the erection of a throne room in the Blue Elliptical Saloon and for the purchase of a crown, diadem, scepter and royal jewels."

The congressman had been little noted before his speech and would die soon afterward. But his oratorical romp through the White House would have an impact when the votes were counted in the uproarious election of 1840.

William Seale, author of an architectural and social history of the White House, calls the speech "Ogle's great joke."

Seale writes, that while most White House furnishings were acquired by earlier presidents, Ogle's speech was not entirely off the mark.

Whatever the facts, the timing of Ogle's speech just months before the presidential election was devastating.

Van Buren's Democrats had called William Henry Harrison, the 67-year-old Whig Party candidate, a rustic has-been and suggested he retire to a log cabin to drink hard cider, the people's drink.

In a spectacular counterpunch the Whigs instantly made Harrison the Log Cabin candidate, a roughhewn people's hero. Hard cider flowed at political rallies across the land.

When a fellow House member was reported to have told the president that the sight of a single gold spoon from the presidential table would be enough to persuade voters to elect his rival, Ogle had his theme. The resulting speech soon became known as "the Gold Spoon oration."

Ferreted out every silk tassel and imported carpet in Van Buren's White House, Ogle took his listeners through "its spacious courts, its gorgeous banqueting halls, its sumptuous drawing rooms, its glittering and dazzling saloons with all their magnificent and sumptuous array of gold and silver ..."

Van Buren had little response even though he asked officials to certify that no gold tableware had been purchased during his administration.

Harrison won the election but died a month after being sworn in.

Congress approved the repair money it had denied Van Buren.

A crown was not an immediate possibility for America's presidents.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Lawrence L. Knutson has reported on Congress, the White House and Washington's history for 34 years for The Associated Press.



A candle in the wind

WASHINGTON — The great orator Adlai Stevenson once said, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

Last week, President Bush did just that. By brokering the release of Yasser Arafat from his house arrest in Ramallah, he ignited a flicker of hope into the Mideast night. He showed that, working together, the Americans, Arabs and Israelis can choose hope over despair.

The cynic will say Bush pressured Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to release Arafat because Saudi Prince Abdullah gave America the oil squeeze, but the seasoned optimist sees the light shining from that power play.

Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres detects something "positive" in the Saudi role. It's not just the oil, he argues, but the willingness of the Saudi royal family to end the standoff between the Arabs and the Jewish state.

"The Saudis are important to the United States, politically and economically," Peres told me this week, "and it's not a shame, because there's an interdependence all over the place."

Peres, at 78, said there is also a sharp ray of light in the deal that is truly historic, the first-ever willingness of this most conservative of Arab societies to recognize the right of Israel to exist.

"The Saudis, who are really coming from the depths of Arab traditions, have decided to change



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their traditional way of looking at Israel and say the time has come to make peace by all Arab countries with Israel under certain conditions."

The man who fought as a leader in Israel's 1948 war of independence and served twice as its prime minister admits the difficulty of translating the Saudi vision into a specific peace plan. Yet he also sees the hope offered through the breakthrough Saudi proposal for Israel to give up its occupation of the West Bank and the creation of a Palestinian state in order to win Arab recognition of its own nationhood.

"If today we see a tunnel without a light at the end of it; in the case of the Saudis, we can see the light, but we cannot see the tunnel that leads to it."

Peres knows the modern instrument for bringing the Saudi land-for-peace proposal to fruition: television.

The Saudi royal family needs to broadcast the idea that striking a deal with Israel ends the hated occupation and gives the Palestinians their own

country. Could that mean a dramatic visit by the Crown Prince to Jerusalem?

"I think this will be a very positive step, but I don't think it will happen tomorrow morning," figures Peres.

Experience has taught the Israeli statesman and Nobel laureate that the pessimists are sometimes confounded by reality.

Peres recalled the 1977 visit of the great Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. Just four years after waging war against Israel, he came to Jerusalem offering the hand of peace.

"You know, when I look back, the visit of Sadat to our Parliament came as a surprise," he said. "We have to keep a certain venue for a surprise."

The great hope for Americans, Arabs and Israelis is that President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Peres can build the tunnel. The great dread is that the enemies of peace — the pessimists in Washington, Jerusalem and the streets and capitals of Arabia will snuff out the light before the good guys can get it.

Chris Matthews, author of "Now, Let Me Tell You What I Really Think" (Free Press, 2001) and "Hardball" (Touchstone Books, 1999), is a nationally syndicated columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle and the host of "Hardball" on CNBC and MSNBC cable channels.

A day drained of sunshine

Rising before dawn to cruise the wires, the foreign press, and an archipelago of Web sites is a sure-fire way to start the day in a chilled lather. It was bad enough right after Sept. 11, but then at least you could be steeled by an unerring presidential sense of right, might and Excelsior. These days, witnessing the Bush administration fall for that old tar baby trap of the Middle East "peace process" and then lose direction in the war on terror is akin to watching one of those Interstate chain-collisions stack up in the morning fog. Ghastly. Little wonder the shakes set in by daybreak.

Did the day begin with a pink May blush? Hard to say. Even a quick scan of, say, the Palestinian Information Center's report on last week's slaughter of four Jews in their beds — "A Palestinian freedom fighter and four Jewish terrorists were killed ... west of Hebron Saturday" — is enough to drain all color from the rosy spectrum outside the window, particularly once it dawns on a reader that a murdered 5-year-old girl counts as a dead "Jewish terrorist."

Does daylight help? A typical survey of the news imposes a filter of gloom. There's a report on White House efforts to "temper" pro-Israeli resolutions on Capitol Hill, lest word get out we support a kindred democracy's efforts to defend itself; a spiteful string of letters to the editor in The Scotsman ("Israel portrayal as perpetual victim rings hollow"); and an ominous news brief ("U.S. Fails to Stop Russian Nuke Aid to Iran").

While those psychedelic photos of cotton-candy galaxies 420 million light-years away made for a nice change of news-art, they, too, were somehow dwarfed by the tsunamis of animus mounting against both the United States and Israel from across little Earth. Our response — a hasty effort to restore U.S. "credibility" in the Arab world (whatever that really means) — looks not only desperate, but suddenly more precious to us than principle.

One simple way to avoid these a.m. news blues



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is not to wake up so early. Still, that leaves the rest of the day. Another possible salve emerges from an article about the plight of Israel's Ethiopian Jews. Amharic speakers, these African immigrants live in a virtual news vacuum. This doesn't sound half-bad until you realize that their isolating ignorance, far from inducing bliss, is actually quite terrifying. They see Hebrew-narrated news footage of panicked crowds after an attack — and find themselves amid real-life crowds after an attack — and are cut off by a language barrier from understanding what's happening to them and their new country. Better to know.

Maybe the real key to equanimity lies within the power of positive thinking. That is, maybe approaching bad news with a better attitude would help. Take, for example, that big New York Times story ballyhooing the "new strategy of joint action and pressure to break the deadlock in the Middle East" lately cooked up between President Bush and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah. So what if this new accord has nothing to do with a Saudi renunciation of its financial and religious (not to mention floridly poetic) support for Islamist terrorism? (The Saudi ambassador to Great Britain recently published a most odious ode to a teen-aged suicide bomber.) So what if it actually grew out of what the Associated Press described as "Saudi criticism that the United States was not putting enough pressure on Israel"? Think positive: Maybe "joint action and pressure" — i.e., sitting on Israel together — is better than none.

But even if you smile when you gnash your teeth, what to do? Here's where it may pay to follow

Colin Powell's example. The Secretary of State is a big believer in what he likes to call "keeping the process moving forward," and I think I finally know why. If you can just keep the process moving forward, you can leave behind, for example, the centrality of Saudi Arabian support for terrorism. With enough forward thrust, even the release of Yasser Arafat begins to resemble the "diplomatic breakthrough" it's been hailed as. Sure, America, shining city on the hill and all that, has used its good offices to prolong — again — the murderous tenure of a terrorist dictator. But the process moves.

Distance covered, however, isn't always ground gained. Without a shared purpose, any "joint action" undertaken by an American president and a Saudi autocrat is meaningless at best. Without a moral and strategic basis, the "diplomatic breakthrough" that frees the father of terrorism is equally senseless. Moving forward may unglue us from the sticking points of reality, but the result is just a blur. Stopping to try to make sense of it all is surely a disturbing exercise. But better to know.

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