

## Fletcher 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

10/24/08

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An anniversary is a convenient time to celebrate what we are and to consider what we ought to be. I was asked to talk today about whatever I wished that was relevant to the occasion, and since anniversaries are all about memory, I have chosen to speak of the usefulness of memory, of the value of the past to institutions and to individuals.

As a student of history, and one of the possibly very few people in this room (perhaps the only person here?) older than the School, I hope I can perhaps stretch the ligaments of our perspective.

Japanese Noh drama reflects considerable respect for the judgment of the elderly, which I must say I increasingly appreciate. The old man character, *okina*, even embodies a kind of saintliness. I also appreciate Japanese folk tradition, which gives the elderly license to make outrageous, if not obscene remarks.

In a conformist society such as the Japanese, this custom of freedom from constraint for the elderly, men and women, was, I think, recognition of the value of dissent and the possibility that disagreement can be creative and helpful.

This is pertinent to all societies and to all institutions

(I don't plan to say anything obscene but my suggesting that possibility has certainly stirred your attention. So let's both keep it in mind)

Recently the university archivist came to my house to collect some files. (I have been here long enough that these would actually appear to be of interest to somebody). I was wearing a favorite old sweatshirt and to my surprise she asked me if she could have that too, along with the boxes of papers she had requested. I said I wasn't quite ready to part with it but I would ultimately surrender it to her.

Her interest reminded me that artifact can speak as loudly as document

The shirt is a white design on a background that is blue, like that of Tufts but of much darker hue. It bears a logo and motto, student-generated I believe. At the bottom of the logo, we have a dove of peace carrying an olive branch; at the top, a martini glass containing an olive, with the dog Latin motto beneath:

Illegitimis non Carborundum

(Don't let the bastards grind you down)

The archivist said that for her the motto embodied the spirit of Fletcher: a rebellious, sophisticated, insouciant streak, underlying a recognition of the essence of diplomacy: peaceful but firm settlement of dispute: by means of negotiation and lubrication. To my mind it speaks more eloquently than the current feeble "f" between two unidentifiable slabs.

Institutions resemble individuals. Henry Chadwick, an outstanding Anglican theologian offers a nice comment on the importance of memory: "Nothing is sadder than someone who has lost his memory and an institution that has lost its memory would be in the same state of senility."

Memory of course exercises its own momentum and is selective in what it chooses. My late father-in-law, when he was in his 90s, once remarked "I can remember Pi out to 13 places but not why I came upstairs" Neuroscientists call this "the memory puzzle."

We can't always will what we remember and some memories thrust themselves upon us. We often select only those parts of the past we wish to recall. But the past is always with us, bringing the tide right up to our feet, lapping at our toes and we should pay it some mind.

History is, of course, all about what we choose to remember: our interpretation of the life of the human community.

Historians select their subjects from the entire realm of human experience. Thus the study of history is the ultimate cross-disciplinary exercise.

That is why it should be intellectual mortar for the curriculum of a School which from its founding has taken pride in inter disciplinary and cross disciplinary learning. This commitment is a deeply significant part of what has defined Fletcher as Fletcher. Today I regret to report that courses identified as History courses comprise only 4 % of the Fletcher curriculum.

Of course you and I are all inevitably historians & our interpretations of the past are always in flux.

As we gain more information, we develop fresh interests that cause us to ask new questions. Present concerns cause past events to take on new meanings. Herein lies the fascination of historical studies.

Clever leaders know this: they study the past, sometimes consciously in order to exploit it.

One such leader is Lee Kwan Yew, founding Prime Minister of Singapore. Lee has used the past as an artful tool to create legitimacy for what was in 1965 a new and highly uncertain polity.

Lee did not denounce Sir Stamford Raffles and his early 19<sup>th</sup> century colleagues for establishing Singapore as a British colony; Lee has honored Raffles. His name appears everywhere, identified with the upscale.

Thus within the colonial experience Lee found and exploited a useful legacy. Coming into office Lee desperately wanted to attract foreign investment, seeing it as essential for the survival of a new nation.

He found in British rule an embodiment of law, authority, and stability important for a tiny multiethnic city state totally lacking resources except for its people and its deep water, sheltered, harbor.

In favor of contemporary realities, Lee abandoned any sense of grievance, either about the humiliations of the British colonial experience or the brutalities of Japanese military

occupation in WW II. He saw no reason to antagonize either one, and every reason to cultivate each. Brooding upon the manifold injustices of the past seemed unproductive.

Another example we can cite of using the past resourcefully is from the international business world. Pan American World Airways, now defunct, was once a great company. In the late 1920s, when air travel was new and dangerous and disasters frequent, Juan Trippe, the company founder, wanted to reassure his customers. For his company, he exploited solid tradition that he borrowed from the maritime world; he grafted the past onto the present.

He dressed his crews in blue uniforms with gold stripes like naval officers; he adopted traditional nautical language: galley, bulkhead, purser. The pilot was the Captain.

He called his airplanes "clippers," recalling that splendid 19th century era when those elegant American sailing ships, greyhounds of the sea, flashed around the world, the finest of their kind and a source of great national pride. That was a time when the US reached the climax of its commercial presence on the world ocean.

Trippe succeeded in persuading passengers that air travel, if still an adventure, was safe and could even be luxurious. And of course gradually it became so. Safe it remains today—if, for the passenger sometimes more pain than pleasure.

Trippe used the past brilliantly to construct a powerful and attractive image for his company and for the industry.

I offer a third example of constructive memory from academia.

Yale University was a provincial college in the 1920s. I can be disparaging because I am a Yale bulldog.

The 1920s were flush times, Yale had the money to expand and the will to do so. Some of its leaders saw the opportunity for the institution to become a world class university. As part of this effort, President James Rowland Angell decided that instead of simply building new dormitories he would call them colleges, British style, and model them functionally as well as architecturally after those of Oxford and Cambridge, then especially esteemed as model environments for teaching and learning.

They would be something more than residential.

They were to be places for the copulation of ideas, although not, I think, expressed in those exact words.

And decades later, Yale has become a great international university and Yale's colleges have grown to be something like what Angell envisioned, enriched by medieval European and British traditions of higher learning enhanced by a distinctive American gloss.

In all three cases, creative action, which is part of leadership, required willingness to study the past to search for what it might offer to the present.

The manifold crises we all now face today provide a stinging reminder of the perils of not learning from the past. As David Brooks recently commented, "The prudent leader possesses a repertoire of events [either] through personal involvement or the study of history."

We can be encouraged that out of a painful time 75 years ago, this significant institution, Fletcher, of which we are all so proud, could miraculously spring to life -- like Athena from the head of Zeus!

May we now adhere to the wisdom the goddess personifies.

Because Fletcher students are future leaders, History demands a significant place in the Fletcher curriculum.

International history teaches us about other cultures; knowledge that is essential to the task of anyone engaged in international affairs

Fletcher's mission is to nourish stewards of the future.  
Successful stewards of the future must be schooled in the lessons of the past.