

Sunday August 5, 2012

How Harry Truman changed the world

By Jim Taylor

Tomorrow marks the 67th anniversary of the nuclear age. On August 6, 1945, the American bomber Enola Gay dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Ninety per cent of the city was leveled; somewhere over 130,000 people died.

As president of the United States, Harry Truman changed the world by authorizing that first use of a nuclear weapon. The world has lived in its shadow ever since.

But not many people realize that Harry Truman may have changed the world even more drastically with a single phrase uttered during his inaugural address to Congress, on January 20, 1949.

Truman had opened his speech by denouncing “the ancient enemies of human life: hunger, misery, and despair.” To counter the threat of communism, Truman declared, it was essential “to help the free peoples of the world, through their own efforts, to produce more food, more clothing, more materials for housing, and more mechanical power to lighten their burdens.”

It sounds good, doesn’t it?

Single solution for everybody

Truman’s solution also seemed to make sense – at least in the context of U.S. industrial dominance during those immediate post-war years.

“Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace,” Truman declared. “And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge.”

To achieve that goal, Truman called for “a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.”

And right there are the crucial words.

No one realized at the time that Truman’s distinction between “developed” and “underdeveloped” areas would become the universal measure of nations.

Ross Smillie, in his book *Practicing Reverence*, argues they became “the standard way of defining societies and governments.”

At that moment, says Smillie, “the focus shifted from relieving poverty, hunger, and misery to increasing production.”

One-track mindset

Today, few of us can even remember a time when the world was not divided into developed and underdeveloped nations. We avoided the word “undeveloped” – it sounded both prejudiced and permanent. But “underdeveloped” implied they were at least headed in the right direction.

The development Olympics had begun. But the stragglers had a long way to go to catch up to the front-runners.

No one asked how well those “underdeveloped” nations actually dealt with hunger, misery, or despair. Were the people happy? Were they fed? Were they physically healthy? Were they emotionally healthy? Were they living in harmony with their environment?

Those factors didn’t enter the equation. Better they should export tomatoes or roses to northern consumers to fatten their balance of trade, than that they should grow rice or corn for their own people.

The marks of progress were considered self-evident – paved roads, exports, consumers, factories, power grids, and cheap labour.

Gross Domestic Product became the universal measuring tool. Community cooperation doesn't contribute to the GDP, but crime does. Exploiting natural resources inflates the GDP; conserving them doesn't. Law suits increase the GDP; volunteering doesn't. Polluting pads the GDP twice; it fattens profits during production, it provides employment to clean up the mess afterwards.

Replacing the older standards

Truman's new paradigm – that is, a pattern of thinking that we don't usually realize we're using – changed the way we evaluate other nations and cultures.

As Smillie notes, "Ancient and complex cultures as diverse as India, Egypt, Ethiopia, Turkey, and Thailand were labeled as inferior to materially prosperous ones."

The new paradigm was an improvement, in some ways. It replaced race and religion as the standards. Africa was no longer "the dark continent." The world was no longer populated by "heathen."

An old limerick illustrates both of the prejudices we used to apply to other nations:

*The poor benighted Hindu,
He does the best he kindu.
From first to last
He sticks to caste;
For pants he makes his skindu.*

No one realized that Harry Truman was playing with our minds when he re-defined two-thirds of the world as "underdeveloped."

"There it was, suddenly," wrote Wolfgang Sachs in *The New Internationalist*, "a pivotal concept which crammed the immeasurable diversity of the globe's South into a single category... The new worldview was thus announced: all the peoples of the earth were to move along the same track and aspire to only one goal -- development."

Different effects on different peoples

The physical bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki launched the developed world into the Cold War and nuclear deterrents. But the nuclear race had little effect on the so-called underdeveloped nations.

For them, the new mindset launched by Harry Truman's speech has been far more significant. It has reformed their economies, their societies, their cultural understandings, in ways that they could not have imagined 60 years ago.

Efforts to measure up to eternal development standards may, in the end, have had more effect on more people than the bombs themselves.

Harry Truman has a lot to answer for.

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YOUR TURN

Thank you for all your thoughtful letters about the Penn State football scandal – too many to print in total.

Although Ted Spencer did wonder about my lack of enthusiasm for college football. “Isn't that being the teensiest bit hard on earwigs?” he asked.

Bruce McGillis, Steve Roney, and Janet Hicks King all challenged the words I attributed to Ayn Rand. They're right; I was wrong. I should have made clear that the words were my paraphrase of the way that Rand's more extreme followers interpret her message. Sloppy editing of my own work, unfortunately.

Janet Hicks King admitted to have been a follower of Ayn Rand, in her younger days, and offered this explanation of what Rand really endorsed:

“Ayn Rand would probably have been horrified to see such a statement attributed to her, as she viewed mankind as being held to a very high standard of ethical, rational, uncompromising self-esteem and self-interest; and it would be beneath such 'heroes' to intentionally 'screw' anyone in order to advance themselves. I suspect, though I can't recall if I explicitly read it, that her interpretation of the Golden Rule would be that the way her 'heroes' treat others IS the way they would like to be treated themselves (as self-interested, rational, autonomous beings for whom emotions are irrelevant and unreliable).

“Your 'Screw others' quote seems, to me, to reflect the approach of ultra-rightwing (and probably ALL) psychopaths. It seems to be close to a quote from William Hoffman (American writer, 1925-2009, in A Place For My Head) 'The golden rule. Screw unto others before they screw unto you.' “Ayn Rand did make some good points about the importance of self-esteem and self-love; and perhaps much of the pain & violence in the world today comes from self-hatred... So many of us will not allow ourselves to be happy because we don't believe we deserve it!”

Joan Mistretta took exception to my description of Jerry Sandusky's behavior as “indiscretions”.

“In case YOU have been hibernating recently,” Joan wrote, “Jerry Sandusky did not have sex with 'Penn State football players.' He had sex with little children, many fatherless and from troubled households, whom he groomed, bribed, and seduced over long periods of time. And to call raping nine-year-old boys an 'indiscretion' is as obscene as anything else in this sad story.”

Similarly, Ruth Shaver wanted to clarify Sandusky's conviction: “His victims were young boys, approximate ages 10-14, who had been part of his Second Mile charity program for troubled youth. Because his victims' names have not been made public, it is unknown whether any of them ever went on to play football at Penn State, though they were exposed to the culture of Penn State football on a regular basis.”

Ruth continued, “Living as I do in Penn State country, I have been struck by how much the response to this situation resembles the cult of personality phenomena that has accompanied so many other scandals. People who have demanded the Pope's head, for his role as a bishop in Germany as abuse came to light there, do not see and do not want to hear the similarities in circumstance with Coach Paterno. They continue to try to lessen his role in the continued abuse and place blame on others in the administration rather than on him. And they will, I am sure, continue to proclaim that he is the winningest coach in college football (409 wins) even though the record has been stripped from him.”

Stephanie McClellan wanted to introduce a self-reflective note: “In your list of institutions that have fallen from grace, you mention the Roman Catholic Church. We would do well to acknowledge our own United Church history as complicit in abuse around the Indian Residential Schools.”

Steve Roney wrote, “I agree with you about the nature of institutions, about how they will sacrifice anyone to their own perpetuation. I don't think, on the other hand, that 'hero worship' was ever the problem here. Jerry Sandusky was not too big to bring down.

“You go on to write as though 'hero worship' was a problem in general. I don't think so—putting aside the problematic term “worship” and seeing it for what it usually is, taking another as an admirable model... Hero worship may present some risks of idolatry, but it is far better than the obvious alternative of self-worship...”

Isabel Gibson asked, “How many people had to collude for this to happen? How many would it have taken to stop it? If we ever doubt that we can make a difference within our own organizations--large/small, business/religious/community--we should remember Penn State.”

Charles Hill wrote, "The sad thing is that this athletics-worship emerges about mid-elementary school. Athletic boys get the girls (maybe a biological drive from our ancient ancestry), and in spite of denials, athletes are given grades they don't earn. When I taught at the university level, I got more than one visit from an administrator. 'You will pass him/her or.....!'

"I think that the ultimate 'God' of society is nearly always power -- financial, athletic, political, or administrative. On the street, power comes from violence and creation of fear. It is such a struggle to not allow the God-of-power to corrupt a church or any other religious system."

Bob Stoddard agreed with my analysis, with one exception: "I believe the role of 'leader' in science differs from one in religion. A religious god-figure is regarded as infallible forever. But, a scientist who suggests a new theory is not regarded as one who has proclaimed the ultimate Truth because it is always subjected to further modifications and/or rejection when a more plausible theory is proposed."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
