

This e-mail is sent only to a voluntary subscriber list. If you no longer wish to receive these weekly columns, send a blank e-mail (no message) to softedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca. Or write to me personally, jimt@quixotic.ca

Sunday September 7, 2014

A nation of enemies

By Jim Taylor

I've been trying not to write about Ferguson, a town of 21,000 in Missouri. It's too easy to pontificate from a distance. After all, what do I – a Canadian, white, living in a community where the only black people are my own grandchildren – what do I know about the tensions plaguing a town that used to be mainly white but has gradually evolved to become mainly black, while its police forces have apparently not evolved at all?

Just 3 of Ferguson's 53 officers are black.

And yet the image of a convoy of armoured military vehicles rumbling through the streets haunts me.

Because I've seen that parade before. Soviet tanks rolling into Budapest in 1956. Chinese tanks parading through Tiananmen Square in 1989. American tanks storming through the desert sands, in 1990 and 2003.

Except this was within America. And the occupants were preparing for war with other Americans.

Escalating crisis

Thousands of people had walked through the streets of Ferguson with their hands in the air, protesting the shooting of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown on August 9.

Ferguson police did everything wrong. They concealed the name of the officer who shot Brown. They released a surveillance video that portrayed Brown as a thief and a bully. They confronted peaceful protests with massed SWAT teams.

Usually, corporations get themselves into this kind of mess over oil spills, tainted meat, and financial flim-flammy. Governments do the same over failed levees and botched emergency relief programs. Crisis communications advisors always advise clients to come clean. If they've made a mistake, admit it. Apologize. Then start making things better.

Much of the strife in Ferguson could have been defused if officer Darren Wilson had faced the music. If he had shown the wounds from Michael Brown's alleged attack. Even if he had admitted that he was scared out of his senses.

After all, Michael Brown was a big kid. The video suggests that he didn't mind using his size and strength to intimidate a store clerk.

Would he also try to intimidate a cop?

Who knows? Eyewitness stories vary widely. But instead of dealing with them directly, Ferguson police hid Russell behind a shield of anonymity. His fellow cops hid behind riot shields and helmets. They brought in heavy armour – part of more than \$4 billion in surplus war equipment transferred from the Pentagon to local police forces.

According to *Maclean's*, police forces in St. Louis county (which includes Ferguson) received seven Humvees, three helicopters, 15 weapon-aiming sights, two night-vision devices, a cargo trailer, and a bomb-disposal robot, as well as a range of automatic pistols and rifles. Heavy-duty equipment intended for use against an enemy. Local police would want it only if they expected to battle an enemy.

Enemy forces

That, I think, is the key to Ferguson, and it points to an underlying malaise. The U.S. has become a nation of enemies.

The National Rifle Association, ultra-right militias, the disciples of Ayn Rand and Milton Friedman, and the Tea Party have all propagandized government as their enemy.

The Second Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution while the newly formed nation still feared that Britain might attempt to recapture its former colonies by force. I read it as intended to have an armed populace available on short notice to repel invaders. Bearing arms was both a right and a responsibility.

But that amendment has been re-interpreted so that now people claim the right to bear arms to defend themselves against their own government.

Until I saw that convoy rolling into Ferguson, though, I had not realized the extent to which governments, through their police forces, see the people as their enemy.

“Militarization,” wrote Radley Balko, author of *Rise of the Warrior Cop*, “is part of a larger trend... that sees the people ... not as citizens with rights but as potential threats.”

Why else would local police forces want to acquire war equipment employed in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Class struggles erupt

Change only the commentary, and the pictures of riots in Ferguson would look little different from Palestinians hurling rocks and Molotov cocktails at Israeli forces. Or blacks in apartheid Soweto rising up against their white South African masters. Or, for that matter, French revolutionaries storming the Bastille.

All class struggles, pitting powerful and powerless against each other.

The federal Justice Department has said it will review police tactics to see if they provoked a pattern of civil rights violations.

In one of the more telling incidents, the Rev. Bernice King met with thirty high-schoolers. Like Michael Brown, her father, Martin Luther King Jr., had been shot by a white man. She asked how many felt her father’s non-violent approach had any hope of succeeding in Ferguson. Only one hand went up.

Such divisions do not bode well for future peace and harmony.

Copyright © 2014 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups encouraged; links from other blogs welcomed; all other rights reserved.

To send comments, to subscribe, or to unsubscribe, write jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

Ted Wilson shares my view of the B.C. government’s agenda in the dispute I wrote about last week: “Another possibility is that the Clark government is attempting to bankrupt the B.C. Teachers’ Federation through endless appeals within the legal system. If the Government loses their current appeal they will just initiate another one. I expect them to end the current strike/lockout through legislation when they reconvene in October, further depleting the BCTF’s finances. The Government isn’t going to run out of money until you and I do.”

Similarly, Joan Janzen assured me, “You’re not being paranoid. Setting up B.C. to be taken over by private education systems is absolutely Christy’s goal. What a nightmare! I wonder if Christy’s hatred of the school system has anything to do with the fact that she was found cheating in a student election? She never did finish that degree.

“Christy and the BC Liberals are ideologues, unfazed by logic or common sense. If only we had the ability to fire them as they are so willing to fire others.”

Isabel Gibson lives in Ottawa, and wrote, “I don't follow BC provincial politics, but your account of a bargaining structure that sees a disconnect between the people with the money to pay for the education service and the people who are responsible for deciding how education will be delivered rings a bell.

“Ottawa -- the-city -- struggles to accommodate long-distance trucks routed through downtown for lack of any other bridge across the river to Quebec. Our City planning department studied the bridge issue exhaustively and identified a solution, only to have it vetoed by the province (provincial seats at stake, perhaps?). But the province did not provide any alternative. And so the trucks continue to roll through our downtown streets, en route to markets and plants in Quebec, causing congestion and safety problems that we can't address.

“Surely it should be the exception rather than the rule to give one level of government the responsibility for delivering a service/infrastructure, and to give another level of government the requisite taxing power to pay for it and the regulatory power to authorize/veto it.

“As for special-needs children being in regular classrooms with almost no support -- that clearly makes about as much sense as mental health patients being in our communities with almost no support.”

Charles Hill, who has dealt with a number of adults with “special needs” wrote “My condolences to your daughter on a number of issues. She is qualified for immediate sainthood.

“It appears that the Canadian education system is more centralized. In the U.S., control, including staffing, the taxation and financing to support the schools, is localized. The controlling board is made up of elected residents. The state has some generalized control over certification of teachers, dispensing special program federal funding, etc. The federal government can withhold money from non-compliant states, but only for specific federally funded programs.

“You raised, tangentially but importantly, another contentious issue. There is a denial, on the part of many if not most parents, of the existence of special needs children. If a child is not learning or is misbehaving, the schools must be doing something wrong. Fire the teacher! I wonder if the same parental thought processes might be the cause of the elimination of many special needs programs in your area.”

Sometimes a letter really gets under someone's skin – as one of last week's letters about religious rights did, for Judyth Mermelstein: “I simply must take issue with Lurna Tallman's comments. In particular, as most of your readers should know, Jesus was ***not*** killed for breaking Jewish law. He was crucified by the Romans (Jews stoned people rather than crucified them) for being an agitator -- that is, inciting rebellion against the Roman occupation government -- and was one of many crucified for it in a turbulent time.

“Furthermore, the idea of civil disobedience on ethical grounds is something Jesus would have learned from Jewish rabbis like Hillel, and not the invention of his gentile followers who decided to turn him into a pagan-style god instead of a failed Jewish messiah.

“Finally, though, what really got my goat was her last line, which is more or less a claim that she has the One True Faith and other people's religions are inferior to her version of the truth. Yes, I know there are plenty of self-proclaimed Christians who share that view, but it strikes me that it's something people tend to get over if they learn the history of their own religion, let alone something more than shallow clichés about the others.”

Judyth went on, “Anyway, thank you for the very eloquent explanation of what lies behind the B.C. teachers' protests. Destroying public education on the pretext of saving taxpayers' money seems to me an ill-disguised means of trying to ensure that the future public will be ignorant enough to believe any lie those in power choose to tell and too exhausted trying to survive to rebel against abuses. Whether the perpetrators call themselves Conservatives or Liberals, the strategy is the same systematic disempowerment of most citizens for the benefit of a select few.”

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at the address above. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

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.

Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.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.
