

Sunday November 4, 2012

Superstorm puts politics in perspective

By Jim Taylor

Flooded subways. Over eight million people without power. Around 80 dead in North America – plus another 70 or so in the Caribbean. Fifteen thousand flights cancelled. Atlantic City's famed Boardwalk washed away. Grand Central Station echoing empty.

I don't need to name the event. You know what it is – superstorm Sandy. Not even a hurricane, technically, by the time Sandy roared ashore in New Jersey – downgraded to a mere tropical storm that strayed north.

But what a storm!

I struggle to understand the physics of it all. Here's what I get. Because we live north of the earth's equator, low pressure areas in the atmosphere tend to spin counter-clockwise. (High pressure areas, obviously, spin the opposite direction.)

The spin forms a funnel effect – like a tornado, only much much wider. The faster the spin, the greater the reduction in air pressure created within its walls. Inside that whirling funnel, reduced pressure tends to suck the surface of the ocean upwards. Just like sucking water up a straw. Except that this “straw” is 1000 km across.

Unimaginable, but...

And inside those walls, the vacuum raised the sea level more than four metres, about 14 feet.

Which is, incidentally, only about half as high as sea levels are supposed to rise if the worst predictions on climate change come true. It's unthinkable, unimaginable. But then, so was Sandy....

It's worth thinking about. Because even this change of sea level gave the U.S. the equivalent of cardiac arrest. The New York Stock Exchange, the pulsing heart of American capitalism, shut down completely for two days.

Damages to property and businesses could run to \$50 billion – twice as much as the bailout of U.S. auto makers following the economic crash in 2008.

Perhaps most amazing, in a country just days from an election, presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Barack Obama quit skewering each other with barbed darts for three whole days.

A natural disaster like Sandy tends to put things into perspective, somehow.

For the last few months, almost every news story out of the U.S. has been spun for its political overtones. Since the primaries started, American media have viewed every issue through red or blue glasses.

You'd think there were no other issues.

But four states -- Maine, Maryland, Minnesota and Washington – will vote on whether gay and lesbian couples deserve the same right to marry as everyone else. Washington, Oregon, and Colorado could approve personal marijuana use. Massachusetts could join Oregon and Washington in legalizing physician-assisted suicide. California could outlaw the death penalty and require labels on genetically modified foods.

“In all,” the Toronto *Star* summarizes, “there are 176 measures on the ballots in 38 states.”

President worship

As an outsider, I sometimes think that Americans try to treat their presidents as omnipotent. I remember my high school teacher painstakingly explaining that in the Canadian federal system, any power not specifically

assigned to provinces reverts to the federal government. In the U.S. system, the opposite pertains; states have authority over anything not specifically delegated to federal legislation.

The president appoints the administration. The president is commander-in-chief of the armed forces. But everything else depends on negotiation and compromise. How many opponents can a president persuade, cajole, or bribe with “future considerations” to get his way?

The president can send Americans to war in places many Americans never even heard of until their sons and daughters started dying there. But the president cannot make banks and mortgage companies behave responsibly. He cannot force industries to stop contaminating the environment. He cannot keep women from getting raped.

He can’t even mandate a minimal standard of education, intelligence, or common sense among those who seek election.

In some ways, a Canadian prime minister has more power than a U.S. president. Stephen Harper can at least require his party members keep their mouths shut.

Futile gestures

You recall the story of King Canute, a Dane who ruled England before the Norman conquest. Canute’s courtiers flattered him, praising his absolute power over everything in his realm.

So Canute (or Knut) parked his throne on a beach. As the tide rose, he ordered the waters “not to rise onto my land, nor to wet the clothes or body of your Lord.”

The sea continued to rise, of course. It soaked his feet and legs. The king moved his throne, and reproved his courtiers: “Thus should all inhabitants of the world know that the power of kings is vain and trivial.”

Superstorm Sandy affirmed Canute’s wisdom.

Either Barrack Obama and Mitt Romney would have looked equally ridiculous wading into the surf in New Jersey, ordering the storm surge to go away.

No political figurehead could deflect the power of the storm, nor mitigate the damages. Not even if such a person got elected with 100 per cent of the votes.

So much for the power of politics.

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YOUR TURN

Okay, writing about the “silly season” and the lack of common sense in the news, last week, may not have been an earth-shaking event. (The earth shaking came as another seismic rupture, off the B.C. coast, by coincidence.) But quite a few of you felt moved to write (oops, another pun).

Ginny Adams, wrote from North Platte, Nebraska: “Living in the good old USA, I’ve been thinking that if the current craziness here gets too much for me, I could always emigrate to Canada -- and then to learn that you are crazy, also -- what is going on these days anyway? Maybe the Mayans are right! Maybe we humans have run the course on life, and so we are ‘un-evolving’.”

Hanny Kooyman mused, “ There is a lot happening at the national as well as the international level that makes me wonder whether I have lost my mind or they have. Money rules as never before... Sharing and thinking of the

common good seems harder and harder. Or perhaps it was always this way and I was just dreaming that things were better years ago.”

Bill Peterson felt that the seismologists bore some of the blame: “If the seismologists had been able to just say they COULDN'T PREDICT but only guess (and hope) the tremors had reduced the chances [of a quake], they hopefully wouldn't get six years in prison... They got themselves in trouble by saying more than ‘we really don't know and cannot and WILL NOT predict’.”

Steve Roney would agree: “The seismologists were apparently not prosecuted for failing to predict the earthquake, but for assuring the local population that there was no danger. That is, they misrepresented themselves as being able to accurately predict earthquakes... Perhaps the proper charge should have been fraud rather than manslaughter; but if a fraud leads to deaths ... ?

“I think, if this is correct, the prosecution and conviction is a good sign. Scientists should not be held, as scientists, to be beyond reproach. To do so is scientism.

“I also frankly fear this story has been misrepresented too easily because of an inherent Northern European racism towards Italians. People are too quick to believe Italians act irrationally.”

The rest of the letters tended to focus on MP Maurice Wellacott giving medals to two anti-abortion activists.

Vern Ratzlaff, in Saskatchewan suggested that “Vellacott was simply following in Harper's footsteps, when Harper pardoned farmers who had been found guilty of contravening Wheat Board regulations. The Conservatives have a great penchant for selective legal interpretation.”

Chandra Schraefel, also in Saskatchewan challenged my accuracy: “I take exception to your description of the two women awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee medals... Only one of the women, Mary Wagner, is currently in jail. Both women have sacrificed their personal safety and freedom by trying to save the lives of unborn babies. They do sidewalk counseling and pray for the women entering the clinics and the people who work there. I have never heard or read that either one has ever ‘forced their way into abortion clinics’. Whether or not you support abortion or agree with Vellacott's choice, you should at least have your facts correct. The untruths in this editorial call into question the veracity of everything you've ever written.”

Charles Hill coined a definition: “Common Sense: you agree with me.”

Nancy Kerr found another example of “silly season” – “the Texas' Board of Education's decree that ‘Critical thinking will no longer be taught in Texas schools.’ (according to a CBC report). Did the conservative MP originate in Texas?”

Clare Neufeld pondered the connection of illiteracy and literalism: “It's discombobulating, at best, and downright disheartening at worst, to see how, around the world, there is an apparent reversion to the ever-more ‘illiterate’ world views - whether they be behaviourists, evangelists, crusaders, or simply disenfranchised folk....

“Is there something which has led to a widespread uprising of those who believe their (conservative?) voices have been silenced long enough?

“[If so] what might an appropriate response from compassionate, caring, ‘truth-bearing’ folks (e.g., me, speaking from an idealized Judeo-Christian perspective)?”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays.

Why not on Sundays, 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

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.

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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 "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, 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.
