

OF BRIDGE BOLTS AND BLOOD SPORT – THE RISKS OF STEALING FIRE

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If the enduring stasis of the United States federal government has not sufficiently darkened the penumbra of pessimism shadowing our fair republic, then the Cassandras among us can take heart in the fact that at the local and regional level, the forces of cupidity and stupidity have apparently not abated. On an otherwise bright 2013 Mothers Day morning, two news items appearing on the first page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* require us yet again to ask – do our corporate and political leaders really know what they are doing?

In an article entitled “Suspect rods used on tower of bridge¹”[1], it was reported that more than 400 steel rods placed in the new San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge’s single main suspension tower may not have been properly manufactured. These rods, as well as potentially over 2,000 other so-called “bridge bolts” used for seismic reinforcement, may indeed be defective. Apparently the rather complex manufacturing technology used to produce the bolts was not monitored, specifications were either changed or not followed, and as a result quality control became as murky as the bay waters over which the new bridge is being built.

Of course the ritual of bureaucratic finger-pointing has already begun with most of the preliminary blame laid at the collective feet of CalTrans, the state agency responsible for managing the project, its parent agency the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, and – surprise, surprise -- the sub-contractor who actually manufactured the bolts. As might be expected, it was only natural the Federal Highway Administration is now likewise swinging from the limbs of the public review tree along with requisite members of the media and state legislature.

The magnitude of reaction has been significant, and ranges from the whines and sniffles of local politicians that their planned opening party for the bridge might be delayed, to a somewhat more substantial concern of the engineering profession that the elegant new structure might drop into the bay should something geologically unseemly occur on the San Andreas fault. The entire shabby situation was put into perspective by Governor Jerry Brown who observed, “Well, shit happens²”[2], which if nothing else, points to the breadth of the esteemed California governor’s Jesuit training in presumably Anglo-Saxon languages as well as Latin.

And, if reading about the trials and tribulations of the new Bay Bridge didn’t make your 2013 Mothers’ Day complete, there was an equally disconcerting article in that Sunday’s *Chronicle* concerning a recent fatal accident involving an America’s Cup boat. In “Speedy yachts – and crews – pushed to limit³”[3], reporter Julian Guthrie discusses the growing concern that the expensive high-tech yachts participating in the current America’s Cup reflect an approach to “extreme sailing” that “pushes boats and sailors to the limit”. Described in the article as akin to “Space Age flying machines”, the new America’s Cup boats are based on an highly evolved, 72 foot hulled catamaran design, with a main sail the equivalent height of a 10 story building.

Indeed, the potential risk inherent in the so-called extreme design of these precocious cutting-edge behemoths has led yet another *Chronicle* columnist, C. W. Nevius, to posit, “In short, technology is a wonderful thing – up to a point. In attempting to build what they trumpet as ‘the world’s fastest boat,’ they have created something so supercharged and scary that these accidents aren’t just possible, they’re likely⁴”[4]. And there, as the Bard would say is the rub⁵[5], for it is clear to both Nevius and the California governor that, *as uncontrolled risk is increased as a result of mindlessly applied technology, so too increases the probability that untoward stuff will happen* – either with bridges or catamarans.

However, what should give us all pause for concern is the apparent moral and ethical vacuity by which technological risk is viewed by many of the America’s Cup participants. Illustrative is a statement made by a representative of the Integrated Marine Group (IMG), a sports marketing organization which assisted San Francisco officials in their negotiations over the America’s Cup. Quoted on local Channel 7 ABC news, when asked if the recent catamaran accident and fatality will have any impact on the America’s

Cup, an IMG executive responded “I actually think it draws people in...it’s sort of the NASCAR model.”⁶[6].

Well, at least the IMG representative was correct on one point – the NASCAR model. This, we would assume, is the same paradigm that causes California freeways to come to a standstill as motorists slow to peer into the most recent carnage that has deposited itself in the fast lane. But, as recognized by both NASCAR and the America’s Cup officials, the carnage model is most certainly and fortuitously (for them) an economic model. In the brave new technological world of the 2013 America’s Cup, there is no difference in the economic value of ticket sales regardless of the entertainment presented; i.e., whether the receipts are accrued from fashionable yachting spectators sipping Chardonnay in San Francisco’s Crissy Field reviewing stands, or from good ol’ boys passing a flask under the bleachers of a North Carolina stockcar race. Bad stuff happens, and there is money to be made from it.

When it comes to sports marketing, America’s Cup officials seem to have adopted Papa Hemmingway’s view of Spanish bullfights that -- regardless of what is happening to the animal out in the arena – it is quite acceptable to charge admission for it. And, what of that elite little crowd in crispy white deck attire and canvas shoes? Blown by the Golden Gate’s 35 knot winds, there is a whiff of nautical change, money, and most assuredly blood, in the air. Again, in the grammatically challenged words of the IMG marketing representative, the America’s Cup will draw “people in because they’re like, ‘Wow this is amazing, I can’t believe there is a car accident,’ or whatever if may be there so dramatic, and that does attract people”. This is an attitude which, as Mr. Nevius has observed, at best “treats sailing like a blood sport.”⁷[7].

But why should we not view the America’s Cup as a blood sport? Western civilization, and that term is used very loosely here, seems to have had a recurring penchant to pay admission to see blood flow in various quantities. Commencing with the first Olympics in 776 BC, the sports entertainment industry got off to a more than flying start. Millennia before the infamous Super Bowl XXXVIII wardrobe malfunction, athletes in the ancient games competed in the nude – a performance criterion that renders Janet Jackson something of a piker. As the games progressed, and to ensure favorable crowd ratings, the Olympics were enhanced to include what Brad Herzog describes as “a surreal jumble of religion and sex and horrific violence. The athletes made animal sacrifices. They visited brothels in between events [author’s note: what does this portend for future NFL half-time regulations?]. If they broke the rules during competition, they suffered lashings from sadistic judges. When they competed, it was often to the death.”⁸[8]. And, as Herzog suggests, if you want an example of true Olympic sacrifice, do not overlook Peregrinus Proteus, who in 165 AD immolated himself on the Olympic flame – an event which most assuredly would have stopped traffic on Hellenic freeways had they then existed.

With all things Greek, however, human failings ultimately fall back in the laps of the gods. Olympian mythology tells us that the ancient games began with the birth of Zeus, for whose entertainment the five dactyls – Herakles, Paeonaeus, Epimedes, Iasius and Idas -- raced at Olympia. The dactyls were, beyond their mimetic proclivities, an interesting group of troll-like creatures. They served as healing magicians or smiths, and were recruited by Hephaestus to work at the forge of the gods. And this is where, even on Mt. Olympus, bad stuff starts to happen.

According to one legend, Hephaestus was born from the union of Zeus and Hera. Another holds that he was conceived asexually by Hera in revenge for Father Zeus’ similar do-it-yourself conception of Athena. Regardless of his parentage, Hephaestus is at times referred to as “he of the shriveled foot”. It was for this deformity that he was cast from Olympus by a less than politically correct Hera. Fortunately for her son’s sake, Hera’s action did not sit well with the local Gods With Disabilities lobby, and Hephaestus became the only deity to return from exile to Mt. Olympus.

Nevertheless, in Hephaestus’ absence the dactyls were both literally and figuratively left to their own devices, and nobody remained to mind the Olympian forge. Being the opportunist that he was, this provided the titan, Prometheus, with the chance to steal fire from Hephaestus’ forge and, worse yet, give it to those strange bipedal beasts that continually threw rocks at each other at the base of Mt. Olympus. With fire these little folks were also given something new that they called “technology” and with it, wonder

of wonders, they could turn rocks into bronze, create all manner of neat things including spears and swords, and otherwise mount Peloponnesian R and D startups specializing in instruments of mayhem.

Needless to say, Zeus, when informed of this bad stuff, and never particularly liking the titans to begin with, had Prometheus bound to a rock where each day an eagle would devour his liver. This punishment continued in perpetuity because, given the liver's regenerative ability, it would grow back over night only to be consumed the subsequent day by the same damnably persistent eagle. Serendipitously, Prometheus' fate is said to have wrought irreparable damage to the local twelve step program, as Dionysius then could cajole his divine friends into yet another goblet of wine with the observation, "Hey, not to worry, look at our buddy Prometheus, if you're concerned about your liver, it'll always grow back."

So, the California governor's observation about the probability of bad stuff happening is not without mythological or historical precedent. Indeed, it can be argued that things started to turn to garbage when Prometheus secreted himself into Hephaestus' forge. As a result, divine fire was given to the mortals and they have been playing with it ever since. Zeus had a reason to be concerned, for humans indeed seem to have an inherent incapacity to appreciate and, more importantly, exercise a stewardship over what has fallen to them from the gods.

Fortunately, if Studs Terkel⁹[9] is correct, hope dies last. And so again we may look to history for some modicum of optimism, as well as the usual larger dose of despair. In this light it was the pre-socratic philosopher Heraclitus who provides us with a bit more salutary than sanguinary view of the ancient Olympian games. Heraclitus proposed that there were three groups of people who came to the games: those who came to run their race, those who came to sell their wares, and those who came to watch it all happen. Of the three, Heraclitus suggests, the greatest burden rested with those who came to watch.

There lie the roots of both our hope and despair. Our unbridled apotheosis of technology must end. To the extent that we continue to tolerate or ignore failed bridge bolts, and to pay admission to sporting events with a high potential for violence and tragedy, will proportionately determine the degree to which we deny both our humanity and evolution as a species.

[1] Van Derbeken, Jaxon, "Suspect rods used on tower of bridge", *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 12, 2013.

[2] Van Derbeken, *op. cit.* .

[3] Guthrie, Julian, "Speedy yachts – and crews – pushed to the limit", *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 12, 2013.

[4] Nevius, C. W., "America's Cup Italian team sets demands", *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 18, 2013.

[5] Rowse, A., *The Annotated Shakespeare*, Clarkson N. Potter Publisher, New York, 1978, Vol. III, p. 225 -- see Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1: "To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;/ For in that sleep of death what dreams may come/ When we have shuffled off this mortal coil..."

[6] Matthews, Mark, "What will fatal accident mean for America's Cup", *ABC 7 News*, May 13, 2013.

[7] Matthews, Mark, *loc cit.*

[8] Herzog, Brad, *Turn Left at the Trojan Horse*, Citadel Press, New York, 2010, p. 173.

[9] Terkel, Studs, *Hope Dies Last: Keeping the Faith in Difficult Times*, Studs Terkel New Press, 2003.