

10/11/2003: A note started to my family from the Hungarian Parliament

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I can feel my gray cells disappearing and if I don't write this quickly it'll all be gone.

At the moment I'm in the Hungarian parliament. The ambience is spectacular. Enormous gold arches, chandeliers, and statues – the full grandeur of Renaissance Europe. The presidents of Hungary and Latvia, as well as various prime-ministers and ministers of education, are here for World Science Day and the UNESCO prize ceremony. But that's still an hour away and last night's cruise dinner on the Danube is still very much on my mind. To be sure, that event started out pleasantly enough. The ending could have been terrible had I not exercised great self-control. Allow me to congratulate myself; I'm sure you will too.

But before I begin, let me tell you that there are 2 pictures I shall never forget. They had the most profound effect upon my life. One was that of a Pakistani soldier's severed head, dangling by his hair in the hand of a Mukti Bahini. The other, a Vietnamese girl-child running in terror, her body on fire from napalm and unspeakable agony in her eyes. I think both were from the NYT. The second was to catch up with me once again on the boat, about 35 years later.

It was a magnificent cruise-ship with lavishly set out round dinner tables, an orchestra, unlimited food and drink, and white-jacketed waiters. I found myself sitting next to a spectacularly beautiful woman from Connecticut. We made good conversation about Pakistan, religion and god, quarks, and the early universe. She was the wife (probably the n'th, at least 30 years younger) of piggy-eyed Mr. Zoltan X. who was being interviewed by a journalist sitting at his side. He was clearly a big-shot. When he finished with the interview he turned to me, soon got interested, dismissed his wife to his former seat, and then the two of us were in intense conversation that lasted almost until the end of the 2-hour voyage. The waiters would not allow our glasses to run empty. Zoltan X. told me that Musharraf had come to see him in NY a couple of months ago for organizing US investment in Pakistan, and that Zia-ul-Haq had held him in similar esteem 20 years earlier. I told him he was wasting his time if he thought that such things impressed me. I don't much care for anybody's association with Pakistan's dictators, I said.

But then Zoltan X. did go on to impress me with his achievements. He's still a whirring dynamo with dozens of major patents to his name. Plus he is really rich (he made his first billion decades ago). He was not just the CEO of Dow Chemicals but also the man who made it into one of America's industrial giants with assets greater than Pakistan's GNP. He is currently on the governing boards of 12 major US companies (Halliburton, Bechtel, Schlumberger,...) of which he is also a major stock-holder, has been invited to the White House to advise on foreign affairs since the days of Lyndon Johnson by whichever administration is in power, and is the only civilian member of a top-secret commission that is looking at a radical redesign of America's submarine fleet. We disagreed on god and religion (he's semi-religious), Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, atomic weapons and Hiroshima, imperialism and Iraq. He's the quintessential American

corporate type – brash and overbearing, full of himself, and has a cultivated self-image of being a no-nonsense, hard-nosed type. But he didn't seem to mind when now and then I told him he was talking nonsense. On submarines we did famously well together and I could easily have spent another two hours talking about propulsion, noise reduction, and the history of torpedoes. (As a 12-year old I adored submarines and dreamt about them, fantasized sinking convoys, as well as hunting and destroying submarines. One of my early heroes was a German U-boat commander by the name of Luttke; strange for a Pakistani boy.)

And then the conversation turned to Vietnam and the 70's. I didn't want to talk about that, feeling a premonition that things could turn unfriendly. Until now I was engaging Zoltan X. both because he was fun to talk to and because you must know your enemy. But now we were getting on to dangerous territory. I knew well about Dow Chemicals and its role in Vietnam from my very first year at MIT (1969). Dow (and Lockheed, Raytheon, Hughes-Martin,...) represented for me the synthesis of science and inhumanity. Indeed, my loathing of corporate America's war against Vietnam had been a big factor in my dropping out after my freshman year (fortunately I returned after a semester). And then Zoltan X. dropped his bombshell – he had pioneered Dow's manufacture of napalm, and then Agent Orange. Personally? Yes, he said, he had figured out the chemistry that allows stuff to stick to skin. It was simple – he explained it to me in terms of polyethylenes and polyacetates and bonding energies. I asked if he had seen the picture of the fleeing Vietnamese girl-child. Yes, he said, the American press had been irresponsible – such things always happen. Anyway, the pictures were giving Dow a bad name so we divested our napalm manufacture to two small companies in California. It wasn't so bad, he assured me, because the US government is very bureaucratic and we weren't making much profit.

At this point I had had enough and didn't even want to go into Agent Orange. I told him that he was a despicable human being, a moral cretin, and he should be tried and shot for crimes against humanity. He was stone-faced, unmoved, and showed no surprise. His wife looked slightly upset. I then walked away with the people around the dinner table staring at me. I had successfully resisted the temptation to throw a plate in the ugly face of American corporate imperialism. Good for me, else I'd be cooling my heels in a Hungarian prison and not sitting in this unbelievably grand hall right now.

So much for that. The ceremony was impressive, and citations were read out for all six UNESCO prizes (four of the five were really impressive; I felt humbled). There was a one minute silence for last year's Kalinga Prize winner who had suddenly expired a few days earlier. (As a general principle, one hopes that mortality risks are not increased upon receiving this particular prize). The president of Latvia – a very impressive science professor – gave an excellent speech on science as an instrument for creating a pluralist society rooted in secular humanism. She was pleased when I congratulated her. I'll head back to Islamabad tomorrow and mail this from there – I don't have an internet connection for my laptop.

Hopefully Chooch and Phudkoo Billa are still alive in spite of Chaudhry Sahib.

I hope everyone is having a great time.\

Love,

Pervez