

# *The Wolf by the Ears*

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It is a curious year, this election year of 1992. We began with the conviction that no one was likely to be able to defeat the incumbent president. Immediately after the conventions, we began to suspect that perhaps incumbency was not the source of strength it usually is. Then we began to think that perhaps the insurgents were going to win this election. All the polls seemed to be indicating that the advantage was with the challengers, and that nothing seemed to be affecting the margin of support in any substantial way. And yet, the same polls seemed to indicate that no candidate had excited any real passion in most voters. All the pollsters reminded us, over and over again, that the electorate is a quirky mood, that even as they indicate the candidates they will support, they indicate that most of that support is very soft. While choosing between the alternatives presented them, most still seem to be wishing there were some other alternative.

Indeed, one of the most interesting polls I have seen this year asked people who had already made up their minds about the candidates, whether they thought any candidate could make much difference in resolving the problems which confront us. And the answer which came back was that the majority of the voters were convinced that no candidate would be able to make much difference, that when all was said and done, the election would not result in fundamental change. Apparently voters are making their choices this year in terms of specific social and economic concerns without any strong hope that any candidate has the vision or the ability to lead us out of the persistent difficulties we confront.

Now, that is a remarkable confession on the part of a people who have generally been characterized by their optimism, their forward looking attitude, their conviction that every problem contains its own solution, if only we can learn to ask the right questions. I found myself wondering what it is about our times, about the nature of our problems which has led us to such pessimism, such quiet resignation, even despair about our own future.

It is possible, of course, that much of what we are hearing is the consequence of the fact that we are approaching the end of a millennium. Western culture has always approached a year with a lot of zeros at the end of it with a sense of dread and foreboding. The record suggests that in the year 500, in the year 1000, and in the year 1500 there was near panic throughout Europe as people convinced themselves and each other that the world was coming to an end and that there was no future beyond the date which loomed so ominously before them. People

abandoned jobs, abandoned property, abandoned families and responsibilities in order to prepare for the imminent end of history.

An echo of that ancient fear is to be heard here and there as we approach the end of the twentieth century, the end of the second millennium. Perhaps that ancient cultural dread is partly responsible for the mood of the nation as we approach this election. But in my heart, I cannot help feeling that there is something more at work here, something more solid than simply an ancient superstition about the coming end of an age. As I think about my own reaction to the choice I will make next month, I realize that I will select a candidate on the basis of a concern about important, but not really central issues. I will choose on the basis of a concern for the future composition of the Supreme Court, on the basis of an attitude toward the role of government in relation to its citizens, on the basis of attitudes toward civil liberties and social justice, but I will cast my vote without any conviction that the person elected will do more than make adjustments around the edges of a long established social consensus. I, too, have little faith in the ability of either candidate to make the fundamental changes which the times seem to demand.

As I pondered this strange reality, this almost deliberate refusal to allow myself to hope, my mind sought an explanation. And I found myself thinking that one source of the foreboding may be a deep sense that the fundamental problems we confront as we move into the twenty-first century are yet to be defined, are yet to be named, are yet to be confronted. We natter on about deficits and about our place in the world community as if the world into which we are moving were indistinguishable from the world in which we have always lived, as if the question is how to reinvigorate the old relationships and familiar processes, when in fact the world into which we are moving is so new that we are not even sure how to define the challenges, how to phrase the questions, how to shape the possibilities. And as a consequence, it is almost as if we are busily trying not to see the challenges before us, perhaps because we do not have the language to describe the gnawing foreboding which will not let us be.

I found myself seeking words to express what it is that looms in my own mind and functions to make most of what I hear in this election year seem strangely surreal and stubbornly irrelevant. And as I attempt to bring that looming shadow into focus, I find myself remembering a summer day, some years ago, at Cahokia, across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. Cahokia is the site of an ancient native American city. At its height, the city occupied six square miles and had a population of tens of thousands. The center of the city was dotted with earthen mounds on top of which were temples and ritual sites. The base of the largest mound covered 14 acres, rose to a height of 100 feet, and was topped with a massive building 105 feet long, 48 feet wide, and 50 feet high. The inhabitants were technologically sophisticated enough to have constructed a "Woodhenge", an arrangement of posts by which to track the movement of sun, moon and planets and thus to predict the approach of the seasons. By the year 1500, the site was completely abandoned, and the great city of Cahokia gradually disappeared, leaving behind only its 100 or more earthen mounds.

On that day when we visited Cahokia, I found myself talking with one of the archeologists who was working at the site. I asked him what had led people to abandon so great a city. He paused, and then said that there were a number of theories, but the one which made most sense to him concerned a fifteen foot high defensive palisade which had been built around 300 acres at the center of the city. The palisade was built of logs cut from the surrounding hills. It took 15,000 logs to complete the palisade. And, then, of course, over time the palisade rotted and needed to be replaced. Evidence suggests that over the years at least four walls were constructed in the same area. No one knows what enemy the wall was designed to protect against--some foreign tribe, or perhaps it functioned to protect the rulers from their own people or perhaps, since there is no evidence the wall was ever attacked, its only role was to designate the city's ritual center, to protect the sacred from the secular. In any case, the process of building and repairing the wall would have stripped the surrounding hill-sides of their trees, would have left them vulnerable to erosion from wind and rain, which in turn would have silted up the streams. In short, it was his considered opinion that Cahokia had so ruthlessly exploited its natural environment that its economic base--the fecundity of its fields and streams--had been destroyed, that Cahokia, the greatest city on the North American continent, had protected itself out of existence.

This, of course, is not a unique occurrence in human history. In a book entitled *A GREEN HISTORY OF THE WORLD*, Clive Ponting examines cultures all over the globe in an effort to discover what relationship there may be between their stewardship of the natural ecosystem and their ultimate destinies. He examines Easter Island and Polynesia, ancient Ur in Mesopotamia, the great cities of the Maya, the Inca and the Aztec, the city states of Ancient Greece and a host of other cultures from earliest times to the present and he comes to a startling conclusion. Ponting believes that while there are a variety of proximate causes for the decline and fall of various cultures and great civilizations, there is a deeper underlying cause which our conventional histories have seldom reported. Underlying the disappearance of many great cities and cultures is an inability to live within the constraints imposed by the ecosystem.

As an example, Ponting recounts that Ur, as it grew into a great city, found that to feed itself it needed to bring more and more marginal lands into production. This required an irrigation system which was a wonder of ingenuity, a system which drained marshlands, and brought water to remote areas not normally under cultivation. It demanded of the city a higher degree of organization, and a larger labor pool, which in turn required more food and more fields and more irrigation and more organization and more people. Unfortunately, the irrigation system, as it poured water over the terraced fields, silently deposited minerals on the soil, minerals which gradually built up and destroyed the soil's fertility. In the end, Ur organized itself, irrigated itself, ate itself out of existence, and the terrain where the proud city once stood is to this very day, a bleak and lifeless desert. Technically, Ur may have fallen to an enemy army, but actually, it was destroyed by its own technology, its own bureaucracy, its own cleverness, its own

determination to live beyond the limits imposed by the carrying capacity of the land.

Pointing tells the story again and again, in place after place--unfinished statues on Easter Island, where the terrain was denuded of trees to provide rollers to move huge statues from quarries to ceremonial platforms, huge cities in Central America abandoned to the jungle because their demands outstripped the ability of the land to support them, Greece stripped of trees and eroded into a backwater, Anatolia deforested and turned into a near desert--all testify to the consequences of living beyond our ecological means.

Reflecting on this story, much of my unease over recent months began to fall into place. The great issue which no one is talking about this election year concerns precisely this question. The federal deficit is small potatoes in relation to the other deficit which confronts the global human community. Indeed, the federal deficit may be just one of the more visible evidences of the deep, fundamental, underlying crisis which confronts us as we move into the twenty-first century.

In all of our talk about revitalizing our economy, about becoming more competitive in the world market, about reducing our deficit by means of greater productivity, about growing a larger and richer economy, there is another reality we seem determined not to name, not to confront, not to discuss, not to consider. Is it just possible that we are in great danger of exhausting the planet's carrying capacity, that every step we take to wring another increment of productivity from the planet only serves to undermine the basis of our cultural existence? Is it possible that we are like great Cahokia, like Ur of old, making small, steadily increasing incremental demands on an ecosystem which is nearing exhaustion, unaware that the very success of our technological wizardry is destroying the basis of our existence?

I fear that there is evidence that the answer to that question may be "Yes." For some strange reason, we seem to conceive of our problems as if they floated in mid-air, unrelated to the earth, this planet which is our home, in which we are rooted, of which we are an expression. When I see the pictures of starvation in Somalia and read about the onset of famine in the Sudan, I understand that the proximate cause of the catastrophe may be civil war, but I suspect that there may be another, underlying cause and it has to do with the fact that the land is no longer able to bear the burden we are placing upon it. When I read of the impact of the AIDS epidemic within the human community, I know that there has always been sickness and disease, and I know about germs and viruses, but I cannot help wondering whether part of what has made this disease so devastating in places like central Africa and our central cities has to do with the inevitable stress of too many people struggling to survive in a blighted and crippled land. When I think of the misery and suffering occasioned by hurricane Andrew, I know that there have always been storms and that they inevitably leave destruction in their wake. But there is something special about this storm and its aftermath, and that has to do with the inescapable fact that too many of us are attempting to live in the paths of

the storms, refusing to recognize that ultimately it is futile to talk about rebuilding to withstand the storms, when our building is upon land too fragile and too vulnerable to the storms to sustain such massive development. When I read of the tragedy in what used to be Yugoslavia, or the conflict in what used to be the Soviet Union, or the break-up of Czechoslovakia, or the rising hostility toward foreigners in Germany, or the violence and terror in our great cities I know that the proximate cause is ethnic hatreds and ancient rivalries, but I suspect that the deeper cause has to do with too many people scrambling for limited resources, for a piece of a world which is less and less able to respond to the demands we put upon it.

We find ourselves in the situation of Cahokia and Ur and hundreds of other great human civilizations. With great skill and enormous technological competence, we have learned to escape the obvious limits imposed by the ecosystem. We have stripped the resources from the hillsides; we have gouged out the earth; we have devised ways of transforming the fossil energies of ages past into heat and light and food but we have been unable to see that each of these great accomplishments is accompanied by a cost. And in our hearts we know, even if we do not admit it to our conscious minds, that the bill is coming due. The great issue we will not discuss in this election is that we as a species, and especially we favored few in this country are living a way of life which cannot be sustained, that there are too many of us in the world, that we are placing too great a strain on the planet, that soon we must find a way to live within the ecological boundaries, or we will destroy the very basis of our existence. The great issue we will not discuss in this election is how to create a sustainable existence in a world of inescapable limits.

Thomas Jefferson once described his position as a champion of human liberty and as a slave-holder in a society of slave-holders as similar to having a "wolf by the ears." One does not want to hold on, Jefferson implied, but it is almost impossible to find a safe way to let go. On another occasion, speaking of the same subject, Jefferson said, "I tremble for my country when I consider that God is just." And, of course, he was right. The country never did find a safe way to let go of that wolf. I suspect that we are in a similar situation at this moment. In our heart of hearts we know that we are living a life-style that cannot be sustained. Not every one, or even the majority of human beings can hope to live as we live in Summit and in communities like it all across this country. As the pressure on the planet increases the cost of supporting our lifestyle will grow. Sooner or later it will change or collapse. We have the wolf by the ears. We cannot hold on forever; we have not found a safe way to let go, to change our habits, our expectations, our dreams. Indeed, we have trouble even naming the problem.

But deep in our hearts, we know it, and it may be that in some inchoate ways we are beginning to wrestle with the moral, economic, social, religious dimensions of the problem. Thus, the controversy over the old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest is not really about saving the spotted owl. It is about how we let go of the wolf we are holding by the ears. It is a question of whether we continue as did the ancient city of Ur in Mesopotamia, meeting the immediate challenge at the

expense of the long-range well-being of the community, or find the means to transform our values so that we can learn to live within the ecological limits.

The track record of our species on this issue does not lead one to optimism, but there is a difference between us and the citizens of Ur: To a larger degree, we know what is happening. As Ur added more and more irrigation canals and intensified its agriculture and moved to monocultural crops in an effort to meet its growing needs, it is unlikely that anyone in that great city knew why the fields steadily declined in fertility. We, by contrast, know what we are doing to the planet. We know that the fate of the spotted owl is, to some degree, a portent of our own fate. We at least know we have the wolf by the ears. We at least know that we must find some way to let go.

This year's election is not likely to address this challenge directly. And that may be why many of us--even if we are not conscious of the reason for the unease we feel--doubt that the choice we make will result in fundamental changes. But stirring deep in us is a recognition that the old responses are no longer adequate to the challenge we face. And in that deep stirring is to be found whatever hope there may be for the human venture as we prepare to enter the twenty-first century.