

The Footsteps of History

June 5, 2004

Hello to all,

This morning I awoke to the soft pastel light of sunrise illuminating the two story high stone wall of our bedroom. The light was filtered through the intricately carved stone latticework of the upper row of windows on the courtyard side of our expansive room. The marble floors glowed softly as the first birds' songs of the morning echoed and the first sounds of the old house awaking for another day began.

We are staying in one of the "old homes" of Aleppo, Syria. It once belonged to one of the wealthiest men in the city, and was converted to a hotel eight years ago. Built around two courtyards, it consists of guest rooms, sitting rooms and dining rooms, all elegantly and tastefully furnished to match the exquisite inlaid stone and carved woodwork of the home's construction. The original decorative wooden panels that lined some rooms were so historically significant they were moved to a museum prior to the home's conversion to a hotel. The expansive property is indeed alive with history, as is the old city neighborhood of tiny, twisting stone streets and narrow arched passageways and tunnels that surrounds it.

As you walk the hallways of this home, you can feel the history seep into your being. You can smell the smoke of the water pipes as old alliances were renewed. You can hear the warm greetings of old friends and the murmur of conversation as new memories were forged. History lives in every worn threshold, every ancient door handle and every carved stone.

History is alive in this way wherever you travel in this region. Here, history is not an abstract concept, the exclusive purview of cranky old academics, debated only by pedantic enthusiasts or locked away in dusty textbooks. Here, history is alive. It surrounds the living, and its lessons, legends and heroes permeate every aspect of society.

In this region we have walked the same streets as Alexander the Great. We have stood in the spot where the Apostle Paul preached. We have attended mass in the restored home of the Virgin Mary. We have walked Roman colonnades in the footsteps of the Emperor Hadrian. We have seen the same Mediterranean villages as Mark Anthony and Cleopatra reportedly saw on their honeymoon. We have walked the innermost courtyards and palace rooms of the Ottoman Sultans. We have explored the same Crusader castles that frustrated Saladin. We have traversed the great Silk Road and the Spice Road trade routes that tied together the ancient worlds. We have explored the great souks and khans that formed the commercial system of the ancient world. We have seen great cities carved from solid rock. We have seen towering temples built to honor gods long since forgotten. We have visited the homes of people living largely the same life as their ancestors did thousands of years ago. Here, history is everywhere. It is just around the corner and literally, just underfoot. Here, history is alive.

Living history is a concept that Americans struggle with. To us, a home that is 200 years old is worthy of national recognition and federal funding for preservation. Here, a home that is 200 years old is considered new construction. A society that is permeated with the legends and lessons of layer after layer after layer of succeeding civilizations, each lasting hundreds to thousands of years, is one that we have difficulty comprehending. Ours is a society that is defined by change, worships youth and glorifies the future. As products of that society, we have little appreciation for, and even less understanding of, people and societies who have an innate connection with a past that stretches for thousands of years. Here, the souls of the people resonate with history, are illuminated by history, are defined and enriched by history. Here, the societies are defined by their history, delineated into tribes and families by their history, and hard wired to the lessons, mandates and edicts of their history.

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These lessons are important because, as a society, we are currently faced with challenges that are intertwined with the history of this region. While we may think we understand the history that forms the framework for these societies, we have missed the fact that the history here is a different version from ours.

“The victor writes the history,” goes the old saying. What is lost in this maxim is that often, the vanquished will nurture and sustain their own version of history through the centuries and the millennia. They will cherish moments of triumph, and cast them in a vastly different light than other cultures. The victor may write their version of history, but the vanquished will cherish their perspective of history, and keep its flame alive for hundreds of years.

As an example, we visited the Dardanelles and the Gallipoli battlefields of WWI in the European portion of Turkey last month. While there, we found it somewhat challenging to work our way down the narrow route through the dozens of tour busses clogging the roads. At every battlefield and monument, they disgorged hundreds of Turkish children and adults. Teachers and guides solemnly taught the lessons of each site to fidgeting youths and rapt adults. The inscriptions were read, and group after group cycled through. This battle, which warrants little more than a paragraph or two in most American world history textbooks, is one of the most important episodes in Turkish and Islamic cultural history. This battle was the greatest, and arguably last, triumph of Islamic armed forces over the premiere forces of the Western world.

Britain, which ruled the world's oceans with the mightiest Navy on the planet, sought to seize Istanbul and control the narrow sea lane that connects the Mediterranean with the Black Sea, and with it, Russia's only warm water ports. Turkey, aligned with Germany in WWI, pounded the British fleet in the narrow channel of the Dardanelles, and forced it to retreat. Britain then tried a land invasion using primarily forces from Australia and New Zealand, which the Turks stopped at the hilltops above the beaches. After six months of stalemated trench warfare in which the British, Australians and New Zealanders made no headway, the British and their allies evacuated their forces in a nighttime retreat. The Islamic Turks had beaten the best the Western world had to offer, and done it decisively. This victory will never be forgotten, and is the defining national triumph that the pride of the modern Turkish nation is built upon.

In another example, while in Damascus we walked by the heroic statue of Saladin, the last leader to unite the Arab Islamic world, and the commander who defeated the crusader forces of the West. His tomb in Damascus is located next to the fourth most important mosque in the Muslim faith, and is a revered shrine in the Arab world. Still today, he is celebrated in verse, song and prose. He remains a living hero of the Islamic Arab people, even though his victories came almost 900 years ago.

Saladin drove the European infidel invaders from the holy lands, and formed the united Islamic Caliphate that survived for hundreds of years under successive dynasties based in Cairo, Damascus, Tehran and Istanbul. Saladin defeated the elite Order of the Knights Templar and the Knights of St. John (the Hospitallers), the top tier of Western Civilization's military capability. His victories over the premiere forces of the West are known by nearly every Arab child, and are celebrated by nearly every Arab adult. His triumph will never be forgotten, and there are many here who long for the return of an Islamic Arab world worthy of respect by other world powers, led by another all powerful, all conquering Saladin. The history of Saladin is alive. It beats in the longing for pride, respect and power in every Arab's heart.

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In this region, history is viewed through a different perspective than in the West. A crusader castle that was evacuated due to insufficient personnel and loss of strategic value in Western history is celebrated as a triumph of Islamic strategy and arms in local history. Middle East battles fought eight or nine hundred years ago do not register on the list of Important World Shaping Historical Events in most American's view of world history. Here, they are the absolute defining moments of all that is important in history, and thus even more relevant to today's events than something that happened last week. Here, history is alive, with some tribes, ethnic groups and nations still smoldering in resentment over lost battles, lost nations and lost civilizations of hundreds or thousands of years ago.

This phenomenon is coupled with widespread frustration and resentment over the loss of prestige and power of the Islamic Arab world. Without the leverage of oil, the Islamic Arab world would likely be a forgotten backwater in the modern world's economic system.

Seven hundred years ago, which is recent history in this region, Islamic civilization dominated the world. They had the most advanced mathematics, astronomy, medicine, military, civil administration, art, libraries and scientific research in the world. Their craftwork, fabrics and metalwork were admired. Everywhere they wished to go, they went and they conquered. Their language displaced all others, their religion became pervasive and the extent of their dominion seemed limitless.

For example, the Islamic world under the Ottomans stretched from Northern India in the east to Spain in the west, even including portions of France. The Ottoman Empire stretched south to the southern fringes of the great Saharan desert of Africa and north to the gates of Vienna, Austria. They ruled most of the known world. Their power was unlimited, their empire vast and their potential for world domination unquestioned.

But then Europe experienced the enlightenment, the reformation and the Renaissance. Scientific innovation and progress took hold. Change and evolution of religious thought spread throughout the West. New forms of art and expression were celebrated, sponsored and encouraged. Change and evolution of social structure and religious practice became accepted and sought. Technical innovation spawned expanding commercial enterprises, which fed an ever accelerating advancement in the quality of life. Europe exploded with progress and consequently dominated the world for hundreds of years through an advanced military and an inexorable exploitation of the world's resources through a grindingly efficient policy of colonization, raping and plundering nation after nation across the globe.

And all the while, the Islamic world remained relatively static. There was no religious reformation in Islam. There was no enlightenment or Renaissance in Islamic Arab societies. They remained almost frozen in their medieval form, yielding the result we see today of Islamic Arab societies caught in an unsustainable state of allegiance to their centuries old customs, frustrated at being left behind by the West and stifled by suffocating political regimes of often dubious legitimacy.

Modern Islamic Arab countries are filled with modern development and capabilities, but are shackled to a culture that has not experienced the revolutionary developments in philosophy, science and religion that Europe enjoyed hundreds of years ago. As their societies strain at the leash of tradition, competing camps of reformers and traditionalists have emerged. As the world has continued to develop, and the West, led by America, has continued its slide into decadence and moral decay (as viewed from this perspective), the backlash against Western values has enabled the traditionalists to hold sway. Their dominance and popularity has done little to advance the agendas of the reformers, who are easily labeled as lackeys of the decadent West.

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Across this region, there is widespread belief that the West seeks to finish the job of the crusades and wipe out Islam. There is frustration and anger with the various potentates, kings and ruling classes that skim off the oil wealth of the region while the people live in relative poverty. There is a demographic time bomb of over 50% of the population under the age of 28, many of them unemployed. There are a variety of tinderbox nations, such as Jordan, just waiting for a spark to ignite the wildfire that will create the next theocratic Iran, or better yet, a firestorm that yields a pan-Arab nation uniting all of Arab Islam into one unstoppable force that will restore the glory of the Islamic Caliphate.

It is into this volatile mix that Osama Bin Laden steps to the fore. To establish and sustain Islamic religious authenticity and credibility among the pious, he speaks in the ancient, formal Arabic dialect usually reserved for academic discussion of historical and religious documents. To establish and sustain authenticity and credibility among the disenfranchised seeking an Islamic Empire, he speaks of modern day Western crusaders, and their plan to wipe out Islam. To establish and sustain the image of the modern day larger than life Arabic hero among the frustrated, he speaks of medieval battles and the triumphs of Saladin. He is efficiently and effectively executing a personality cult model designed to ensure that his tomb lies next to Saladin's in Damascus.

Taken in the context of the living history of this region, the decline of the Islamic world relative to the West, and the corrupt and decadent nature of many of the ruling classes of the region, it is not hard to see how Osama Bin Laden is successfully managing his campaign to be the next Saladin. It is his most fervent hope to be the next Caliph (supreme religious ruler) of a united Islamic world, stretching from Indonesia in the East to Morocco in the West, with everything in between swept clean of infidels and apostates.

He has successfully cast himself as the hero of the common man, struggling against the Great Satan of America and triumphantly striking blows into the heart of the infidel beast. He has nurtured and sustained his persona as a pious holy warrior, empowered by the Koran, fighting a just war against the Western Crusaders, striving to free the holy lands from the infidels who despoil the shrines of Islam.

His call is a seductive one to a region long separated from its glorious past. He promises to restore glory, power and righteousness to the entire Islamic Arab world. Here, history is alive. Its messages resonate and the footsteps of its heroes echo down the streets. Osama Bin Laden seeks to be an Islamic hero for all time.

It is this point that the West misses. It's really not about the West, it's about this world, the Arab world, the Islamic world. In the immortal words of Tip O'Neal, "all politics are local." It's not about us. It's about doing whatever it takes to get Osama and his cause immortalized in monuments, mosques and tombs across the Arab world. The only thing that matters here is history. If his name is not celebrated in song, verse and monument in 200 years, he will have failed. We just happen to be the most convenient and recognizable villain to enable and enhance his Islamic Arab hero persona.

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Into this complex world of history, culture and religion strides America, its naiveté at the fore.

On the right, are believers that sprinkling magic democracy pixie dust over three former Ottoman provinces that existed for hundreds, if not thousands of years as distinctly separate ethnic, religious and tribal groups until the Europeans arbitrarily crammed them into the artificial country they called Iraq will yield a happy, moderate, and thriving Jeffersonian democracy. The Right's hubris and self-righteousness is exceeded only by their ignorance of local history and historical precedent. Just as Tito's Yugoslavia disintegrated into ethnic cleansing and the settling of centuries old grievances when his iron grip relaxed with his death, the same fate is probable for Iraq. The prevailing opinion here is that Iraq is headed for civil war, with the likely outcome being annexations of the Shiite South by Shiite Iran, of the Sunni center by Baathist Sunni Syria and of the Kurdish North by Turkey (to prevent the Kurds from building a nation from the revenue of the Northern oil fields). Here, history is alive, and the ancient fissures between the three historical Ottoman provinces that make up Iraq easily trump the benefits of Western democracy as we know it.

On the left, are believers that declaring a state of peace, sitting down and talking to people like Mr. Bin Laden, understanding his issues, perhaps addressing his loss of self-esteem as a child, would allow us to all gather around the campfire for a few verses of Kumbaya. They believe all of this historical grievance nonsense would be forgotten once Mr. Bin Laden and his followers understood the healing power of a cup of double brewed herbal tea. The Left's self-absorbed naiveté is surpassed only by their ignorance of how this region works and the historical factors that drive this area's modern nation state and cultural behavior. There is only one thing that is respected in this region, and that is sustained political will backed up by relentless and ruthless power. This group would do well to study the history of Hama, Syria, and learn how the regime that runs this country bought 30 years of domestic stability through the ruthless suppression of a Muslim Brotherhood led uprising in that city. The U.S., with an attention span of a two year old, a complete lack of national purpose and an easily manipulated fixation on the Why-America-Is-Responsible-For-Everything-Wrong-With-The-World agenda of the Europeans, is easy pickings for the people here who hold grudges for centuries. The American Left is convinced that the problems here can be quickly solved with the same tools they use in their group therapy sessions and weekend workshops. The lesson the Left needs to learn is that there are people here whose descendants will be happily cutting off the heads of their great, great grandchildren and celebrating it at dinner. Here, history is alive, grievances last for centuries, and they are not resolved by Dr. Phil.

On this trip we have walked through the remains of once dominant cities and civilizations. They were the most advanced, diverse, creative and powerful societies of their day. They had the most powerful economies and dominant militaries in their world. Some lasted for millennia. Some only lasted for a century or two. All fell, and all that remains are some carved stones, slowly melting away into the earth.

Here, America is viewed as just another powerful nation state that is quickly passing away, destined to disappear into the sands of time, and that time will be sooner, rather than later. Here, they know that their peoples will be in this same location, living their lives, long after America has passed away, its digitally stored history lost, and its civilization forgotten.

Here, memories are long, and grievances, like a fine sword, are preserved and sharpened for millennia.

Here, history is alive.



The silk tomb, Petra, Jordan, built by the Nabataeans around 100 A.D. The Nabataeans were the leading civilization of their time, flourishing from the 6th century B.C. to around 300 A.D. The Nabataean civilization controlled the trade routes of the crossroads of the world, was extremely wealthy, very diverse, had high culture, advanced hydraulic technology, a flourishing Arts community, and was militarily powerful enough to hold off the Romans for over 100 years. This tomb, like almost all other buildings of Petra, was carved from solid rock. It once boasted finely crafted carvings, pillars, entrances and statues. Like their civilization, all the glories of the Nabataeans' Silk Tomb have melted away into the earth.

Be well,
Doug