The Empire Never Ended

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Sunday

Wow, what a difference a week makes.

Last week I wrote:

> Well. That week went by fast, in an anxious blur.

This week went, it seems, even faster, and my anxiety was cranked up even higher.

At Work

At work, I've been trying to direct the work of a team in China; I'm not going to say "manage," because I'm not their manager. They write software for other groups in the company, including ours. It's been difficult for various reasons. I can't do it in real time, because of the time difference: it is 12 hours later in Shanghai. It isn't their team's fault, but part of the group was under quarantine for weeks and weeks, and not able to go into the office; some team members may still be unable to go into their offices. There's also a language barrier that is quite low when interacting with some folks on that team, and quite high when interacting with others. This is especially awkward when we can't have a conference call but have to communicate entirely by e-mail, unless I'm willing to shift my work hours closer to Shanghai time.

In the case of the group's manager, the barrier is quite high, as his written English is not very good. We've also had some open disagreements before on technical matters. On Friday morning I found out that this manager has been passively refusing to work on a key required feature of this application because he disagrees with the way my team engineered our product. He sent an e-mail in which he essentially "called the manager" on me, adding a higher-up to the e-mail conversation, to try to get out of supporting the feature he doesn't want to support. He's doing this despite the fact that it's been a documented part of the requirements since last July, and he actually lost this argument several years ago in a full meeting of the company-wide engineering group, who ruled that

engineers elsewhere in the country had good reasons to need different standards and the software team would need to support them.

I was furious; I've been sending him these requirements since last summer. This product is supposed to be shipping about now. And so I basically called him out, pointing out that he's known about my group's use of this technology for years, I've been sending his team requirements for months, and he's been deliberately trying to get out of doing his job, first passively for months, and now actively, and if he wouldn't allow his team to finish this product, they should send me the source code and let me finish it.

And then I sent a note to the higher-up telling him that, while working with a number of the team's members has been great, the group's manager is more of an impediment to getting our products finished and shipped than a help, and therefore he should no longer be employed by Thorlabs.

I have never, in any workplace, gotten to the point where I've actively called for another employee to be fired. As a worker I generally see myself in solidarity with all other workers, managers included, especially since I've occasionally been a manager. In general I'm very patient and I know other employees have their own troubles; they are often overloaded with work, and not always properly trained, or given the resources they need. But this guy has tried to exceed his authority over other business units with far more skilled engineers time and time again and I'm sick of it. I have major product deadlines to meet.

This project was largely dead in the water last summer because our electrical engineers were too busy with other projects to work on it, so I learned to design the required circuit boards myself, soldering the first few together myself, and then learned to design a printed circuit board with EAGLE, paying for five revisions of the prototypes myself, so that I could continue to make progress writing, from scratch, the thousands of lines of code that make up the common platform that this product and a planned future product will run on. Even with everything I've done, we've still had to shift deadlines several times because working with the software team in China has been so slow. And now the manager of that team is trying to hold up the completion of this product with his petty and cowardly authoritarianism.

I thought long and hard about these e-mail messages before I sent them, because I'm aware that sometimes the wrong squeaky wheel gets "greased." There's a chance that I'll be the one accused of harming the company and being too difficult to work with. I believe my manager will back me, and I know the hardware engineer on this project will back me, but they could be overruled. So my credibility, and possibly my job, could be at stake here. Nothing will set a 52-year-old software engineer's hands to shaking more than the idea of having his family kicked off their health insurance and trying to start over with a new job.

What the Doctor Said

I had an appointment with my doctor later Friday afternoon. My heart was racing and my hands shaking and I considered rescheduling; I didn't want my doctor to think my blood pressure and heart rate were normally like this. But I went anyway. It was a good appointment; we talked about everything I wanted to talk about. I'm still taking two medications, a blood pressure medication and potassium, to make up for the way the blood pressure medication drives down my potassium levels. I've lost a few pounds since last fall; I could stand to lose twenty more, but only twenty, not a hundred. My mood is decent, certainly better than it was when we were trying desperately to finish selling the old house. I'm anxious, but it's not really hard to see why.

He was a bit concerned because towards the end of my appointment, although my blood pressure was fine, my heart rate was still 140, which is not at all normal for me. He was concerned enough that he had his staff do a quick electrocardiogram. It did not look too alarming, because he let me leave the office, and I did not seem to be showing any other symptoms of a heart attack, but there was something a bit odd in the waveform; I don't remember, and did not understand, exactly what it was. So I'm supposed to keep an eye on my pulse and report back, and watch myself for any other symptoms of heart attack.

I don't think I actually have coronary artery disease. My cholesterol numbers are good. But I have had some odd incidents. Back in college one summer I went to see a doctor because my heart was racing all the time. I was taking a prescription decongestant at the time called Seldane. Tachycardia was not a known side effect of this drug at the time, but the FDA pulled it off the market a few years later because it was found to cause dangerous ventricular arrhythmias. And about twenty years ago I was briefly hospitalized for intense chest pain. I was found to have bad reflux due to my very stressful work situation at the time. There was no evidence that I had any heart disease. I even had a "nuclear stress test" and everything looked fine, although the stress of having to pay over ten thousand in medical bills that weren't, to my surprise, covered by my insurance, despite my best efforts to make sure everything would be covered before accepting treatment, certainly did nothing good for my health.

But I don't know everything, and things change, so I'm watching the situation. Some folks on my mother's side of my family had diabetes; some folks on my father's *and* mother's side have had heart disease. My mother's father had heart attacks, although I don't know much about the nature of them, and I know he lived quite a while after that, and eventually died of cancer, not heart disease. Diagnostic tests weren't as good as they are today.

Did he have coronary artery disease, or did he have some kind of issue with stress-induced tachydardia or arrhythmia? I don't really have any way of knowing, now. Those things can probably kill me just as dead as clogged arteries. I do know I have to find ways of lowering my stress level, and I've got to get back into a regular exercise regimen, even if it is just walking on my treadmill.

A Nice Cold Glass of Corona

I also had a brief chat with my doctor about coronavirus, particulary, our strategy for trying to avoid, or at least delay, infection. In a situation like this, our goal really should be to "flatten the curve" — even if many of us will eventually be exposed, we need to keep the rate of new infections slowed down so that the small percentage of infected people who need urgent medical care to survive will be low enough that the system can accommodate them. See The Telegraph:

> In simple terms it is to "flatten the curve" of the outbreak if (as is probable but not certain) it hits Britain. This means taking measures that prevent the virus running through the population at speed and unhindered so that the impact is spread over time and the NHS not overwhelmed.

Of course, in the United States, the headline of that article, "Coronavirus: Don't worry about the politicians, the experts are in charge" — does *not* apply. I am very sorry it has come to this, but it has; you should not take seriously any information released from any American government source, including the Center for Disease Control. These organizations have lost all credibility under the Trump administration; the Surgeon General Dr. Jerome Adams spoke on CNN, telling Jake Tapper that Trump

> . . . sleeps less than I do and he's healthier than what I am. . .

And the White House has been in open conflict with the CDC; according to AP News

> The White House overruled health officials who wanted to recommend that elderly and physically fragile Americans be advised not to fly on commercial airlines because of the new coronavirus, a federal official told The Associated Press.

And so if you are looking for objective information and recommendations, I would urge you to look to sources from outside our borders, or at the very least, to avoid government agencies.

I told my doctor about our preparations — training everyone in hand-washing, stocking up on non-perishable food, and otherwise getting ready to "self-quarantine" if necessary. I also asked him whether he thought that it was time, yet, to curtail social activities and outings, here in our corner of Michigan. He said that he is not doing that yet. So we are not doing it yet, although we are now doing the elbow bump instead of shaking hands, and doing extra hand-washing when we go in and out of our home or other buildings. And our faces are getting lonely and sad, because we hardly ever touch them anymore.

Those Sexy, Sexy Roman Bones: the Metropolitan Opera's Staging of *Aggripina* (2020)

We didn't manage to get out to see the Metropolitan Opera's live-stream of *Aggripina* last weekend, but Grace went on Wednesday with our friend Robert during the day, and I left work a bit early on Wednesday evening and ate movie theater nachos for dinner so that I could see the last-chance matinée.

Note: the following review contains spoilers of events that happened almost two thousand years ago.

Aggripina is quite an old opera, with music by Handel and a libretto by Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani. It premiered in 1709, over three hundred years ago! And its subject matter is considerably older than that; it is about Aggripina the Younger, who died in the year 59. I'm not a classicist by any stretch of the imagination, so I had to look some things up. According to [Wikipedia]:

> Her father was Germanicus, a popular general and one-time heir apparent to the Roman Empire under Tiberius; and her mother was Agrippina the Elder, a granddaughter of the first Roman emperor Augustus. She was also the younger sister of Caligula, and the niece and fourth wife of Claudius.

Yes, she was both the niece of, and wife of, Claudius — those crazy royals! In fact she had to get the law changed to allow this "avunculate" marriage.

> Both ancient and modern sources describe Agrippina's personality as ruthless, ambitious, violent and domineering. Physically she was a beautiful and reputable woman; according to Pliny the Elder, she had a double canine in her upper right jaw, a sign of good fortune. Many ancient historians accuse Agrippina of poisoning her husband Claudius, though accounts vary. She briefly served as the *de facto* ruler of Rome during the reign of her son, emperor Nero. In AD 59 Agrippina was executed on the orders of Nero.

Nero

I should have done a little bit of reading before seeing the opera, because this was a bit confusing. Nero is Aggripina's son, but not the son of Claudius, which explains why he was not the default heir to the throne, and Aggripina had to try to convince Claudius to designate him Emperor.

In the original staging, Nero would have been played by a *castrato*. (If you don't know what the *castrati* were, I'm not going to be the one to tell you about them; look it up, but make sure you're sitting down first). But *castrati* are a bit scarce these days, so he was played by mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey. With a short haircut that makes her look a bit like a young David Bowie, and an array of tattoes including a death's-head moth on her neck and the letters "NERO" on her knuckles, Lindsey makes herself the most high-testosterone, alpha male

every time she is on the stage, and it's absolutely hilarious; in one scene, a bartender demands that he show his ID to buy a drink, and he pulls out a condom; the bartender remains unimpressed. Nero is the horniest thing on two wheels throughout the opera, rubbing up against anyone he can, including his mother (those crazy royals, again!) and Poppea, played by Brenda Rae.

Aggripina

His mother Aggripina, played by Joyce DiDonato, is quite different. While she is entirely ready and willing to use her erotic wiles to dominate and control the various men around her, she seems indifferent to her sex drive, and only aroused by the prospect of greater power, particularly the power that would come from putting her son on the throne.

Here's the not-very-secret secret of opera from this period: it's pretty boring. The music literally wasn't terribly original:

> In composing the opera Handel borrowed extensively from his earlier oratorios and cantatas, and from other composers including Reinhard Keiser, Arcangelo Corelli and Jean-Baptiste Lully.

I'm no expert on these operatic forms, but let me quote what I wrote to my friend David on Thursday. In describing the first part of the opera, I wrote:

> . . . my mind was wandering a bit, because I was getting kind of tired of the pattern: one minute of sung dialogue, followed by five minutes of a character repeating the same phrase, singing scale runs over pretty repetitive musical phrases.

That's the *da capo aria* style in a nutshell, at least as I understand it. But things got a lot more interesting as the show went on. The opera is set in modern times, more or less; basically, in a Roman Empire that never ended, in which historical figures take selfies in front of the empty throne, people use TV cameras and laptops, and Claudius wears a suit and an overly-long red tie that looks oddly familiar. But then,

> . . . it starts to accelerate. . . the music gets weirder and darker and more energetic, with all kinds of semi-dissonant accidentals creeping in, and what almost amounts to a rock beat (not literally a rock beat, but much more aggressive and emotive tempo) in some scenes. And we start to get to know the characters, and it just gets wilder and wilder. The performances start to cover a huge emotional range, from joy to pathos to comedy to complete psychopathy!

The producers of this show knew that long sections of the opera, but by no means all of it, could easily seem tedious to a contemporary audience, and so they energized things considerably, giving the audience a lot to watch while the characters sing those scale runs. This opera in particular was very well-served by the live stream format. Although the close-up views of the makeup, intended

for viewing by a live audience, made the characters look slightly ghoulish, we also got to see all the amazing choreography, including the bar scene, which I believe will be long remembered in the annals of the Met:

> There's an absolutely amazing sequence at the start of the second act, when the stage is set with a (modern) bar and a harpsichord. A maestro comes out and plays the harpsichord through this scene while the characters dance around him in a mix of modern styles, and sing in his ear, and Poppea gets drunker and drunker, and Nerone is doing hilarious physical comedy. It's just an amazing sequence.

It isn't all slapstick and pyrotechnics, though. While it is hilarious and disturbing to watch Nero (called Nerone in the opera) moping, planking, crotch-grabbing, and snorting coke all over the stage, there are also scenes that are simple and moving. Aggripina's aria that begins and ends "pensiere voi mi tormente!" is particularly moving:

Pensieri, voi mi tormentate!

Ciel, soccorri a miei di segni,
soccorri, ciel!
il mio figlio fà che regni,
e voi Numi il secondate!

Quel ch'oprai è soggeto a gran perglio.
Creduto Claudio estinto,
a Narciso e a Pallante
findai troppo me stessa.
Ottone ha merto, ed ha Poppea coraggio,
s'è scoperto l'inganno di riparar l'oltraggio.
Mà fra tanti nemici a voi,
frodi, or è tempo; deh non m'abbandonate;

Pensieri, voi mi tormentate!

I found several English translations of this aria online, but I didn't like the way they scanned, so in my *hubris* I took a shot at creating my own. I don't really know any Italian, especially not Italian from 1709, but I did take a couple of semesters of Spanish way-back-when. So, having no shame, I thus present my own translation, likely not either very literal or very accurate, and made with an awful lot of help from *Il Professore* Google:

My thoughts, how they torment me!

Bring me succor; help me, please, you gods!
Let my son reign; bring him all your aid!

All that I have worked for is in peril.
I believed my husband Claudius was dead,
And said too much to Pallas and Narcissus.
If by chance my scheming is discovered,

Otho has the the power, and Popea has the courage,
to save me and cover up the scandal.

I'm surrounded on all sides by my enemies.
Your time has come, my cunning! Rush to save me!
In my hour of need, do not forsake me!

My thoughts, how they torment me!

At the start of the staging, we see a giant painting of a she-wolf, with pendulous nipples, nursing two anatomically correct babies, Romulus and Remus. The stage is a set as a crypt, but with a giant staircase leading up to an empty throne. As a man reads an old book — the *Histories* by Tacitus — we see the characters seem to sit up from their tombs, each with his or her name carved into it. As the opera progresses, the throne is always on stage, even if it is mostly hidden. Every room is arranged from the walls of the crypt, and the tombs become the characters' cars, couches, and beds

Late in the opera, after Aggripina sings "pensiere voi mi tormente!" we see the she-wolf again, but looking the worse for wear, her nipples sagging and her colors smeared. As we approach the end, the we see the she-wolf again, dead, upside-down, literally teats-up.

The characters all return to the crypt at the very end of the opera. Their tombs are again lined up and each lies down upon his or her crypt. Some some resigned, some angry, some contented; Aggripina weeps as she lies down on the cold marble.

The man sighs and closes the book. He begins laughing, uproariously.

Election Thoughts

Tuesday is the primary election in Michigan. Tonight I took the kids downtown to the University of Michigan's central campus to see Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Occasion-Cortez. Well, to *hear* them, actually, since it was far too crowded to be able to actually *see* them. I have a few thoughts. (A lot, really, but it is after 11 p.m. and I have to get up in the morning, and I just spent far too long trying to translate lines from an Italian opera... so this will have to be terse).

I'm terribly worried that the consent manufacturing and narrative control going on in the media, and the election fraud happening under our noses, is going to result in Michigan, a state that went for Sanders in the 2016 primary, blowing it.

And if that happens, I expect to see more states fall like dominos; Sanders will not be able to gain a clear majority in delegates. And if he can't, this is going to be a shitstorm.

I think that by the time we get to the convention it will be abundantly obvious that Biden is simply not up to this job, and panic will set in. Then we'll see a "brokered convention." And crazy shit will probably go down. I would not be

shocked to see them wheel in a giant cake with Hillary Clinton inside, ready to pop out and save the party. But whatever happens, if the Democratic Party does not run Sanders, they are going to lose to Trump, in a landslide.

It didn't have to be this way. Let's review a few things that one can find out with a little digging, but not by watching MSNBC or CNN. From TDM Research:

- In South Carolina, Biden's results were 8.3% higher than predicted by exit polls. Not polls conducted *before* the election, but exit polls.

- In Massachusetts, Biden's results were 15.7% higher than predicted by exit polls. These were votes tabulated by electronic voting machines.

- In Texas, Sanders' results were 11.8% lower than predicted by exit polls.

There are more alarming numbers at that link above. They are from states where votes are counted by electronic voting machines, not from states using paper ballots. The use of such electronic voting machines is outlawed in most countries.

Meanwhile, in Texas, Dallas County is requesting a recount because ballots from *forty-four* tabulating machines were not accounted for. Fortunately, these precincts use electronic devices that mark a paper ballot, so it should be possible to actually *perform* a recount — but this is nuts.

Current uncertified results from Texas have Biden 4.5% ahead of Sanders. An unknown number of ballots are at stake.

And in California, things are still quite a mess.

The party is doling out delegates the way they did in Iowa — to Sanders' opponents first. By the time they release final numbers, the narrative has been cemented into place. We won't see finished totals from California until after the next round of primaries on Tuesday.

Our elections ought to be the gold standard of elections, the envy of the rest of the world. They clearly aren't. The discrepancies in results compared to exit polls are alarming at best. The use of electronic voting machines doesn't meet widely accepted international norms and as a software engineer, I have a particular interest in warning people never to trust their elections to computers.

If you don't support Sanders by now, I probably don't have an argument in my back pocket that is going to suddenly make you support him. So I'm not going to waste a lot of breath trying. He certainly doesn't represent everything I would like in a presidential candidate. He's much too far to the right for my tastes, and too much a part of the Democratic party machine. But his positions on the biggest issues match with mine reasonably closely, so I'll take him.

However, he's about the farthest-right candidate I'm willing to consider. Biden isn't even *remotely* a Democrat as I understand the word, looking back over the history of the Democratic party.

If you're still reading and willing to go along with me, I urge to read a couple of articles. This one from The New Republic is about the 1972 Democratic National Convention and George McGovern:

> A specter is haunting the Democratic Party — "McGovernism." In 1972, President Richard Nixon shellacked his Democratic opponent, George McGovern, by a 23-point margin in the popular vote. Following McGovern's defeat, Democrats began running towards the center and haven't looked back, even though that center seems to have moved further and further to the right with each passing election.

And:

> McGovern didn't lose because he was too far to the left. He lost because he was facing a popular incumbent presiding over a booming economy.

If you are considering voting for Biden, I urge you to read this piece in Current Affairs:

> Biden is not what he seems to be, and there are some facts we need to confront. Democratic leaders have tried to conceal that Biden is actually more of an unprincipled political insider than an affable middle-class schlub, but a general election Donald Trump will expose it for all to see. Not only that, but when it comes to "electability," Biden is weak and vulnerable, and while those weaknesses may be kept out of view in the primary, they will be on full display in the general election — with devastating results.

And this piece, from The Guardian:

> At no point in his career has Biden proven willing to take the slightest political risk on behalf of workers. His appearances in union halls occur when he needs something from labor. On the other hand, when Biden went to vacation in the Hamptons during the 2011 Verizon strike, workers in the area sought him out "just to possibly get a show of support, a thumb's-up, a head nod, anything" — to no avail. That same year in Wisconsin, labor leaders specifically asked Biden to come to rally their resistance to the brutal, ultimately successful attack by Scott Walker; Biden declined.

And this editorial, from Essence:

> Be clear: Former President Barack Obama may consider Biden to be his BFF, but the man cannot be trusted. He is making it plain that he will beat Trump at his own game, twisting the knife of white supremacy deeper still into the core of this nation with a smile on his face and a song in his heart.

> Democrats, is this your king?

If you supported Warren, I urge you to read this piece from The Outline:

> It's instructive to look at the people who overwhelmingly support Sanders: teachers, nurses, bartenders, cooks, servers, maids, builders, pork plant workers. These are working people who want to build a better life for themselves and their families. They haven't been tricked into supporting Sanders. They are making an educated choice about which candidate has their interests at heart.

> Warren will not be the Democratic nominee for president in 2020. It's okay to grieve she won't be on the ballot in November. But you shouldn't let that grief make you give up on the ideals that made you support her in the first place. By refusing to support the only progressive left in the race — someone who can get enough delegates to become the Democratic nominee — you are forfeiting your own power to change the future.

The Michigan primary is Tuesday. I just checked my registration yet again.

I still fear that the manipulation of the narrative has blown it for all of us.

If you are in Michigan and you already voted absentee for a candidate that dropped out, you should know that you can still vote for a candidate in the race:

> Voters who want to change their vote can request to spoil their ballot and request a new one by mail before 2 p.m. Saturday or in person before 4 p.m. Monday.

> If a voter's ballot has already been received by the clerk, there is no option to spoil the ballot on the day of the election.

> Requests to spoil a ballot ahead of election day must be made in writing in-person at the clerk's office or voting center, by regular mail, by fax or through a signed letter emailed to the clerk.

And that's about it — it's late and I need to get on to bed; the house is a mess; the babies are crying. A new week of pulse-pounding action awaits!

About This Newsletter