

A fond farewell

by Robert_J_Caldwell

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes tells us that "to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." So, although Ecclesiastes' lilting verses of prose poetry do not mention it, the time must inevitably come to say goodbye. For me, that time is now.

After 29 years at the San Diego Union-Tribune and 21 years as editor of Insight and its predecessor Sunday Opinion section, I'm retiring from the newspaper. I'm not retiring as a writer or citizen but I am saying goodbye to my good colleagues at this newspaper, and to the faithful readers of Insight.

Like so many goodbyes, this one is tinged with sadness, but also with the anticipation of new vistas and new things - my small part of this world made over by change.

Taking leave of something that has been such a big part of my life for so many years makes this a time for reflection, too. Anyone paid to record their views weekly, in signed columns no less (no place to hide), in print for two decades and in unsigned editorials for nearly three decades will have their share of winners and losers.

I'd like to think I got most of the big issues right.

I crusaded for human rights, not least because the great horrors of the 20th century showed in such terrible detail the cost to be paid when the moral worth and dignity of every human life went unrecognized. Think Auschwitz, Stalin's gulags, the millions sacrificed to Mao's mad dreams, Cambodia's auto genocide, South Africa's apartheid and a hundred lesser horrors.

Surely it was right to swear, as Thomas Jefferson put it, "eternal hostility to every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

Today we are confronted by the vestiges of 20th-century tyranny - in such places as North Korea, Burma, Cuba, Zimbabwe. In China, Vietnam and elsewhere, we see political dictatorships harnessed to quasi-capitalist models of economic development. I never doubted that it was right to oppose their petty tyrants, too.

I was a Cold War hawk, unabashedly so.

The great drama and moral struggle of the 20th century pitted the ideals of liberal democracy - by which we mean representative government, freely chosen within a framework of constitutional protections for individual rights - against totalitarianism. It took a global war to banish fascism. After that, the Soviet Union and its evil (yes, Reagan was right) empire had to be opposed.

What clearly thinking person could fail to enlist under the banners raised by Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel and so many other Cold War heroes? I was proud to enlist.

The nearly bloodless collapse of the Soviet empire and its parent regime proved the power of moral force, and vindicated the Cold War warriors. The three greatest of these were Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II; the remarkable triumvirate that together defeated the Soviet Union and ended the Cold War.

I argued the case for freedom of the press and freedom of expression because they are indispensable to political freedom.

On domestic issues, I favored the linked causes of the Reagan coalition that bound together conservatives on national security, free-market economics and traditional social values. This wasn't mere partisanship, but rather fealty to overarching ideas and ideals that were, and are, in my view best for America. Note that many Democrats embrace them, too, if less consistently in practice than Republicans.

My admiration and respect for the men and women of America's armed forces was unbounded. I wrote about them frequently; detailing their sacrifices, their dedication, their professionalism and their unceasing contributions to the safety and security of our country. I wouldn't change a word.

Some would argue that my support for the Iraq war should be counted on the loser side of the ledger. I would, respectfully, disagree.

I supported the Iraq war because I considered Saddam Hussein not only an evil, vicious dictator but a clear danger to vital American interests, and not just in the perilous Middle East. This judgment, I contend, remains valid whether or not Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction at the time of the invasion. He possessed them before and clearly planned to possess them again.

I conceded the obvious, that the Bush administration badly bungled the aftermath of defeating Saddam. I continue to believe, fervently, that America's national security interests absolutely require that we persevere in Iraq long enough to secure the favorable outcome now, finally, in prospect.

The latter opinion especially is controversial, I know. Yet, I believe it will be vindicated by history.

Few things that I've written have been as angrily denounced, even vilified, as my support for much of what George W. Bush has tried to achieve as president. The Bush haters (and that's the right word) are legion, as my e-mails can attest. History, I think, will record Bush as a flawed president prone to outsized mistakes, but nonetheless as a fundamentally good man with well-intentioned instincts.

On one overriding matter he's been unquestionably correct. For America and the West, the only feasible defense against Islamic terrorism is an active offense, striking this enemy before it can strike us.

Since 2000, I've reported extensively and editorialized regularly on the Tijuana-based drug-trafficking cartel known as the Arellano Felix Organization. I've chronicled its murderous practices and the immense damage it, and Mexico's other drug cartels, has inflicted on Mexico and the United States alike. Fortunately, the AFO is much diminished today, thanks to years of dedicated, courageous work by law enforcement on both sides of the border.

I salute, again, the men and women, many of whom must remain unidentified, who have sustained the long fight against this vile criminal syndicate.

Thanks to this newspaper, I've been privileged to travel extensively, in Latin America and Asia especially.

I've stood at the Korean DMZ, looking through binoculars into North Korea. I've interviewed, in camps along the Thai-Cambodian border, refugees and guerrilla fighters fleeing Pol Pot's terror. I traveled repeatedly to Central America during that region's left-right civil wars in the 1980s. During two trips to Castro's Cuba, I marveled at the courage of dissidents bravely resisting a totalitarian state. In 1989 during the Palestinians' first intifada, or uprising, against Israeli occupation, I spent weeks interviewing those on both sides of that interminable conflict.

Through it all, I learned new respect for journalism as the chronicler of history's first draft. What a privilege it's been to serve this calling, this newspaper, and, I hope and trust, our readers.

A fond farewell by Robert_J_Caldwell