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**LESSONS LEARNED**

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For a dyslexic, I have an extraordinary relationship with reading. Although when I say “reading,” I fudge a bit. I usually have an unabridged recorded book going in my car. I have another audio book in an MP3 player during my walks. I also have two to three “real” books going at once for evenings, weekends and travel time. I pick one or another up according to mood.

I probably complete five books a month. My wife, Nancy, recently confronted me with a tough question: “What are you trying to get out of all of your reading?”

I really haven’t gotten to the bottom of this, but I have some pretty good ideas. First, let me acknowledge that there is a bit of compulsiveness about this. I’ve always been hungry about learning, particularly learning concurrently from various disciplines. I love finding the connections between and amongst disciplines, as well as the way different disciplines develop their conceptual frameworks and analytic systems. Something in physics might provide me a useful metaphor for use in politics. Likewise, reading about history has brought me some extraordinary insights into our current ecological crisis.

Despite these compulsive aspects, reading does slow me down. There is a focused single-mindedness to the endeavor that is not unlike meditation for me.

The benefits of this habit manifest in my work. My reading offers me new perspectives, language and metaphors and often remarkably poignant examples for use in my law practice. Finally, I find that I can communicate more by the use of novel language and creative metaphors. It often “shakes up” the dialogue in ways that yield more innovative thinking, leading to inventive problem solving.

All in all, my passion for reading works for me. It keeps me grounded. It stimulates my creativity. And, it gives me a broader canvas upon which to envision solutions for a better outcome.

This summer, my reading of history opened up some insights about how our historical behaviors have had extraordinary unintended consequences on the environment. As you review the list of the titles, which I provide below, you might not expect that to be the outcome. But it was. The books were not selected because I expected them to be interrelated. It’s just how it turned out to be. They covered a span of continental history from the 17th to the 20th centuries.

My 2010 “summer reading” consisted of:

- “The Imperial Cruise: A Secret History of Empire and War” by James Bradley (2009);
- “The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America” by Timothy Egan (2010);
- “A Country of Vast Designs: James Kay Polk, The Mexican War and the Conquest of the American Continent” by Robert W. Merry (2009);
- “American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House” by Jon Meacham (2009);
- “The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull and the Battle of the Little Big Horn” by Nathaniel Philbrick (2010);
- “Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, The Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History” by S.C. Gwynne (2010); and
- “The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl” by Timothy Egan (2006).

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Remarkably, I had identified almost all of these books in advance, prior to reading any of them or understanding the journey upon which I was about to embark. The books are listed in the order in which I completed them. A few overlapped in the reading process. As I begin to tie these together, I am not by any means suggesting that the point I am making is central to the book. Rather, it is central to the system of thought that I began to construct.

So, let's begin. In "The Imperial Cruise," I learned that one of my favorite historical figures, Theodore Roosevelt, held to a view of race which I found unimaginable for a national leader in the 20th century. This volume deals principally with Roosevelt's efforts in the first decade of the 20th century to open Asian ports for U.S. commerce. The underlying theme is that Roosevelt believed that American hegemony was premised on its Anglo-Saxon heritage. Asian populations were uniformly inferior, although Roosevelt would nominally designate the Japanese as "Anglo Saxons" for political purposes, with extraordinarily negative future consequences. "The Big Burn" concerned a fire in 1910, which erupted over a single weekend and burned millions of acres across Eastern Washington, Idaho and Montana. But the more engaging back story was that of Roosevelt and his colleague Gifford Pinchot in creating a system of U.S. Parks and Forests managed by the United States Forest service. This story for me was one of unheralded heroism in the face of an overriding environmental event, a natural part of the ecosystem, except for its enormous size.

Next, I read "A Country of Vast Designs," which analyzed the single term presidency of James Polk and his super human effort to bring Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Oregon and Washington into the United States by means of threatened (in the case of the Oregon territories) or actual (with respect to the other states) war. Here, I saw a direct connection between the manifest destiny of Polk, with his outlook on race, and the imperial mindset of Roosevelt with respect to Asia. More particularly, I found a congruity between Polk and Roosevelt with respect to Native Americans. Polk was a fellow Tennessean and a political successor to Andrew Jackson. "The American Lion" gave me background on Polk's thinking toward Native Americans as, Jackson revealed his own savagery toward indigenous peoples in the South.

"The Last Stand" was my first study of "Indian Wars." I was as much stunned by the direction of U.S. policy toward Native Americans as I was by the incompetency of the egomaniacal George Armstrong Custer. "Empire of the Summer Moon" applied the same U.S. policy treatment toward Native Americans further West and South of Custer. A remarkable book, "Empire" reveals the paucity of moral content in our policies toward indigenous peoples. But, more importantly, it reveals a larger pattern of behavior toward the environment itself, which would lead to devastating consequences in the future. The long and short of American policy toward Native Americans was that they either should be subdued or exterminated. In their extermination, vast tracks of land - millions upon millions of acres - could be made available for the country's western expansion.

One strategy used to conquer the Comanche's was to destroy their food source. In a period of a few years, some 51 "buffalo men" with high powered rifles killed over 5 million buffalo for the purpose of starving the Comanches out of their lands. Thus, at the end of the 19th century, with no Comanches and no buffalo, U.S. policy directed the then disenfranchised immigrant populations of the Eastern seaboard to the high plains of the Southwest, offering land for cultivation. This part of the county is given to 20 or fewer inches of rain per year - considered the minimum for maintaining any kind of agricultural production. The buffalo grass that, for centuries, had held soils in place and housed complex ecosystems, was about to be removed and replaced by crops unable to withstand the harsh climate. "The Worst Hard Time" tells of the consequences to those who were given land in the high plains, who uprooted the buffalo grass and dislodged the native soils to plant cotton and winter wheat. An eight year drought turned the area into complete devastation, from which much of the area has never recovered.

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Thus, from a variety of authors covering different subjects, I learned of how our approach to the indigenous peoples of this continent and the failure to appreciate the environmental systems in which they and we live, led not only to the destruction of those peoples but the very environment that their societies had protected for centuries.

We are each connected with every other human on the planet. History demonstrates how our limited perspectives on the world can create devastating and unintended consequences. History reminds us to stay alert not only to what we can see but to the larger patterns which we may not see because of the limitations of our narratives.

Awareness, curiosity and work allow me to continue to observe, to expand my horizons, to find new patterns, to have expanded conversations, and to seek innovative solutions for problems which we may not even yet understand.

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