

Narayanan Balakrishnan ✓

When Journalists Dig Into History

SINGAPORE—Every profession has its temptations. In journalism, the temptation is to play historian. With the possible exception of looking for something "ironic" (which in the journalistic lexicon means anything that is not totally predictable), nothing delights journalists more than looking for historical parallels to current events.

It's 1979, and Iraq is invading Iran. Remind your readers (as a New York Times reporter did at that time) that the Arab aim has always been to subdue the Persians since the victory of the Arabs in the battle of Qadisiya in A.D. 637. James Reston branded the war as one of the "ancient struggles."

Now, Iran is invading Iraq. So, tell your readers (as the Economist did in its July 14 issue) that it is the revenge for Karbala. The magazine tells us that "The historic tragedy of Shia Islam was the massacre in A.D. 680 of the forces of Hussein, the prophet's grandson, at Karbala, 50 miles south of Baghdad. Iran's Shias are now getting their chance at revenge."

There is hardly a current war that has not been "historically" explained. You may think

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that China and Vietnam have been fighting only in the past three years, but journalists will quickly correct you and point out that Vietnamese kings have been fighting the Middle Kingdom for about 1,000 years. The superficial reader may think that the Sino-Soviet conflict is an ideological one or a border dispute; seasoned foreign correspondents will tell you, however, that the men at the Kremlin are still haunted by the memories of Genghis Khan and the invading "yellow hordes."

Nothing like a dash of history to add profundity to a mundane current event; it seems to be the current journalistic dictum. A closer look, though, shows that many of these "historical" parallels are on very shaky ground.

Vietnam and China may, in fact, have fought each other 1,000 years ago; but it is

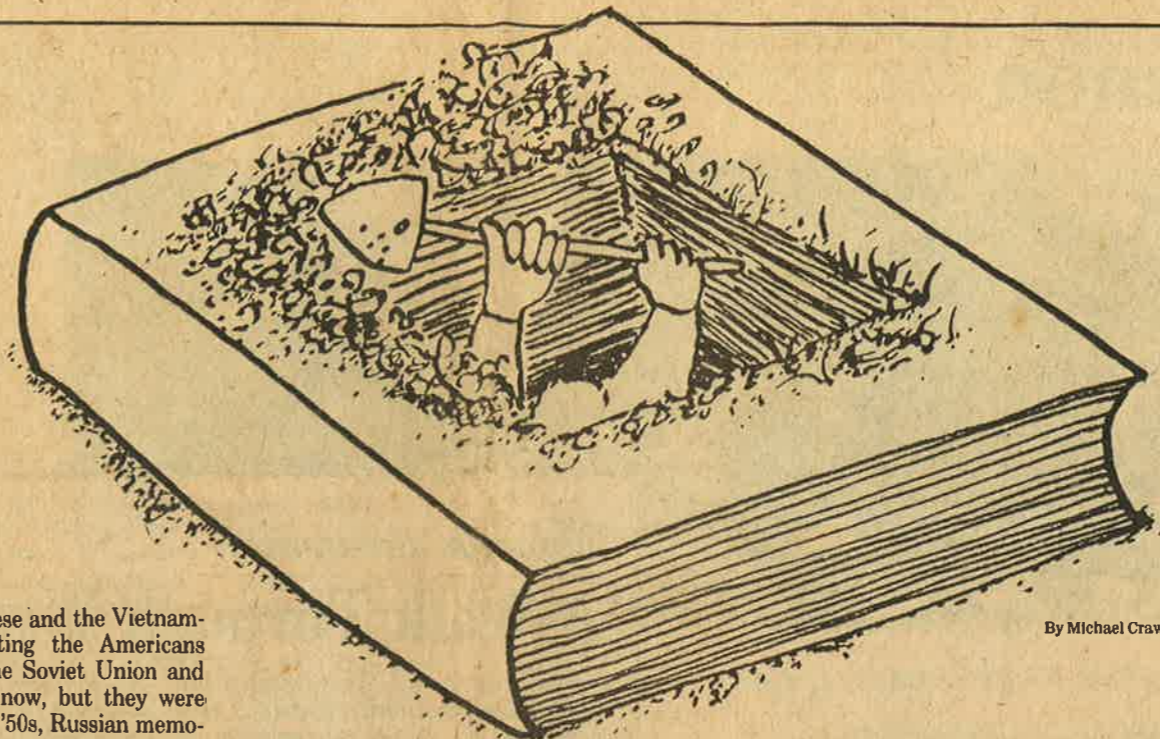
also a fact that the Chinese and the Vietnamese together were fighting the Americans much more recently. The Soviet Union and China may be enemies now, but they were allies for a decade in the '50s, Russian memories of pillaging "yellow hordes" notwithstanding.

There are few neighboring countries in the world that have not fought each other within the past few centuries. But historical memories are not so deep that one-time enemies are doomed to fight each other to eternity. It is doubtful whether actual memories of war last more than a generation, and, in any event, there are too many cases of reconciliation between nations who used to be bitter enemies

plied that it was his job to carry out the invasion and it was the job of the professors in Heidelberg to explain why, for historical reasons, it had to be done.

The same journalists who drag out forgotten battles to explain current skirmishes seem reticent when it comes to explaining peace. Why is it that the French are united with the English in the European Economic Community now and are not plotting revenge for the battle of Waterloo? If historical memories are so important, how is one to explain that both the French and the Germans are now allies against Moscow? How is it that Britain and its former colony, the United States, despite the war of independence and the wars after that, can now have a "special relationship"?

It is no accident that historical generalizations are made more often about the developing countries than about Europe. It is not that the French and Germans have a special gift for forgetting the events of the past 80 years, whereas the Sunnis and Shias cannot forget grudges from 12 centuries ago. Few foreign correspondents—and even fewer Western readers—are aware that the history of Asia is also a many-headed hydra, like the history of Europe, and that it can be used selectively to justify almost anything. That is why the Iran-Iraq conflict is more likely to be explained in terms of Shia-Sunni conflict than as the ideological, economic and territorial dispute that it is, whereas the French-German conflicts are explained in terms of



By Michael Crawford

common agricultural policy of the EEC without recourse to the events of the two world wars.

Factors beyond mere ignorance seem to be at work in the journalistic tendency to resort to history at the first excuse. Always acutely aware of the perishability of journalistic writings and of the incomplete nature of their accounts written to meet deadlines, journalists are game for something that sounds permanent or comprehensive. And they think they can cure their sins by dipping into history. By linking their temporal accounts to ancient events, journalists hope to transcend the limitations of their craft much like new immigrants who construct elaborate family trees to ennoble their ancestry.

We journalists have also been brainwashed over the years by textbooks and autobiographies of retired journalists that say we will be witnessing "history in the making"—even though historians themselves seem to prefer the memoirs of the politicians and official records to our writings. Perhaps it will be better for all concerned when the next war comes around if journalists confine themselves to telling us who is selling the arms to the antagonists, what the ideological differences between them are and what the economic issues at stake are. It would certainly be better than telling us that the kings of both the countries concerned fought a battle on the same spot 1,000 years ago.

The writer is a journalist for the English-language newspaper New Nation in Singapore.

George F. Will Who Says The '50s Were Bland?

Nostalgia can reflect failure of nerve, a flinching from an arduous present and a daunting future. But Jeffrey Hart's new book, "When The Going Was Good!" a recollection of life in the 1950s, is constructive nostalgia.

Hart, who teaches English at Dartmouth and helps edit National Review magazine, counters that decade's despisers, who say the '50s—tailfins and all that—revealed America's crassness. To the intelligentsia, Ike and America were "the bland leading the bland." To Hart, "Not since the 1920s had so much been happening, both in popular and high culture."

In high culture, certainly: in the '50s, New York's three baseball teams had these four centerfielders: DiMaggio, Mays, Mantle, Snider. Also enriching the life of the mind were distinguished novelists (Faulkner, Hemingway), poets (Eliot, Frost), theologians (Niebuhr, Tillich), and painters (Hopper, Pollock) who made Manhattan the art capital of the world.

As a freshman in Connecticut in 1958, I remember Manhattan just before the awful decline. But the retreat from the city began in the early '50s, out on Long Island, where Levitt & Sons was completing a new house every 15 minutes, and selling it for \$7,090.

"Eisenhower's smile," writes Hart, "was almost a philosophic statement." Some persons who wanted to supplement the smile with conservative ideas were casting seeds on stony soil. The emblematic intellectual of the '50s, Lionel Trilling, had written in "The Liberal Imagination" (1949) that "Liberalism is not only dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition." There were, he said, no conservative ideas in circulation. But in 1953, Russell Kirk published "The Conservative Mind," and in 1955 William F. Buckley Jr. launched the magazine (National Review) that, a quarter of a century later, was the president's favorite.

In October 1951, Lucille Ball began television's first long-running "sitcom" (situation comedy). Soon Lucy was, er, "expecting." (CBS banned the word "pregnant.") Forty-four million persons watched the episode, "Lucy Goes to the Hospital," twice the number who watched Ike inaugurated the next day.

In 1953, Hugh Hefner, the Henry Luce of the skin game, launched Playboy. In 1957—not a moment too soon—Searle pharmaceutical company launched Enovid—"the pill." Three '50s books—"The Kinsey Report," "Peyton Place" and "Lolita"—suggested what was, increasingly, on America's mind.

A Memphis record producer repeatedly said: "If I could find a white man who had a black sound and the black feel, I could make a billion dollars."

David S. Broder

'Two Presidents Who Have Mattered'

When President Truman in the spring of 1951 was weighing the decision whether to fire Gen. Douglas MacArthur from his command of

cealed the MX missile. The Russian in the cartoon takes out his hammer and destroys all the shells. Reagan chuckled, and approved the

tion of these books is the intimacy of the view they give of politicians and presidents at work.

These are not debunking books. Donovan

shadow across the history of the second half of the twentieth century. That history is not always written in a way that Mr. Truman would

Not long ago, I received a letter from an old uncle of mine in India that made me ponder about the confusing times we live in. My uncle had written to ask me, among other things, whether it was true that religious fanatics were about to gain political control in the United States. The fame of the Moral Majority and other such groups seems to have penetrated into even the remote small town in southern India where he lives.

Before someone concludes that my uncle is a village man-of-God welcoming the rise of religion in America, let me say that he is a staunch atheist. In fact, he is the sort of old-fashioned atheist no longer found in Western countries, where, though it may be under severe attack, rational humanism is still the dominant ideology.

My uncle lives in a feudal country where animals and elements still are worshipped as gods and the power of science and rationalism, at least in his small town, is very weak. This makes him a fierce partisan of Enlightenment

ideas, a man almost as fanatic in his atheism as most people in his town are in their religiosity. I am sure that such men as my uncle existed in the West during the times of Galileo and Copernicus.

The son of religious parents, my uncle rebelled in his youth and joined a quasi-nationalistic anti-upper-caste movement in southern India called the Dravidian Club. The movement was led by a quixotic man who sported a white beard and who always wore a black shirt. He urged his followers to enter temples and break idols in order to demonstrate that the idols were not invested with supernatural powers. My uncle went to jail a couple of times for doing so.

I remember the odd names of Western thinkers that he used to read and quote to me — Voltaire, Ingersoll. With an enthusiasm for metropolitan intellectual life that only a provincial schoolteacher could muster, my uncle read all the translated works of Western Enlightenment thinkers that he could lay his hands on.

My Rationalist Uncle

By Narayanan Balakrishnan

My uncle became disenchanted with the club when it advocated, on the eve of Indian independence in 1947, that it was better to be ruled by the "rational" British until the Indian masses were freed from religious shackles than to be ruled by a religious Brahmin elite in an independent India. After this, my uncle joined an offshoot organization called the Dravidian Progressive Club, which welcomed independence as the best way to free the masses from religion. The last I saw of him, my uncle was still propagating his rationalist beliefs in dusty village squares of India and officiating as a secular priest at "progressive" weddings.

When I first arrived in the United States, in 1974, I wrote to tell him how Americans were not so rational or

"scientific" as he might have thought. I told him that though people did not worship stones or the wind here, there seemed to be enough superstition around, although it was usually justified as being "scientific." I wrote to him about unidentified flying objects and "scientific astrology" that used computers. I also told him that people here seemed as awed by "experts" as they were in India by holy men. And I told him something that he refused to believe at first — that in this citadel of rationalism, a number of young people were attracted to "Oriental mysticism" and that some of them could be seen parading in saffron robes in the streets.

My uncle wrote a passionate reply saying that fools there always will be,

but were not the majority enlightened in America? Hadn't Americans just landed on the moon while people in India were still worshipping it as a god? He enclosed a pamphlet he had brought out after the local temple installed a public-address system to broadcast songs during religious festivals. Once electricity arrived in town, this was one of the first uses made of it by the town elders, and my uncle's pamphlet thundered: "In the West, where electricity was invented, the people are using it to go to the moon and cure the sick, and here the first thing we do is to use it to spread superstition." Of course, he could not foresee the "electronic church" in America.

What a blow it would be to my uncle if, indeed, the religious right grew big enough to assume power in the United States. He would not be the first passionate man, and certainly not the most important man, on whom history had played cruel tricks. He could share his grief with supporters of the French Revolution disappointed by Napoleon or with Marxists in the West

who felt betrayed by the Soviet Union. The list is endless.

But there would be something special about my uncle's anguish. Disappointed Western Communists can console themselves with a "god that failed" and turn to democratic socialism. The spiritually inclined college student from the United States who discovers during his visit to India that supposedly nonmaterialistic Indians love Japanese wristwatches and tape recorders more than Krishna can return to home-grown spiritual retreats in Vermont or Denver.

But what can a retired village schoolteacher in rural India do if the people who put the first men on the moon start to insist that the universe was created in six days?

Narayanan Balakrishnan, a 1980 graduate of the Columbia University School of Journalism, will soon join The Singapore Monitor, a newspaper that starts publication in January.