

Of cows and men

(with apologies to Steinbeck)

By: Patrick Harris

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It was while growing up in Louisiana that I was given one of those earthy pearls of wisdom that sticks with you for life, although I can no longer remember the source. 'When cows escape from the farm, you've got two problems. You have to catch the cows and you have to mend the fence'. This may not be as powerful a tool as the BCG matrix, or anything produced by Michael Porter, but it is a simple representation of the duality and multifaceted nature of issues we face in everyday problem solving.

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In fact, I couldn't help but think of this issue while observing Washington DC's response to world governance since 11 September. Mr Bush was quick to start chasing the cows (disguised as terrorist organisations) and he was quite right to do so. The land of the free and the home of the brave had felt the brunt of international terrorism in a most foul manner for the first time. But I would have been more supportive of his actions had he embraced at the same time a fence mending programme of bridging the growing gulf in cultural understanding between America and the Muslim world. Or, America and the rest of the world, in some cases.

Recently, I was lucky enough to chat with a Washington-based Futurist and I asked him 'What would you have said to Mr Bush in the week prior to 911, knowing what you now know?' His answer was, starkly, not at all related to informing the President of a growing dislike for American foreign policy or its gunboat intervention methods. Rather, it was that 'planes could be used as missiles'. This seemed a bit short-sighted as a comment coming from a Futurist, so I asked again, this time suggesting that it might be better to get significantly higher numbers of Americans to have and utilise passports (excellent fence mending tools), with increased travel to foreign countries and thus increasing the level of cultural understanding. 'No', he said, 'This administration doesn't want to hear that. I'll have to wait for a new one.'

Think about that for a moment. The world's only superpower is out of step with the bulk of the rest of the planet, it is angry at recent events, unsatisfied at the lack of concrete results from its retaliatory undertakings to date - bad guys still

running amok and no WMDs thus far - and most importantly, it *still* feels it is doing the right thing!

And here I was thinking that having two superpowers locked in an arms race for all those years was a bad thing. What I would give today for the stability afforded in those bad old days of playing 'catch me if you can' with the big red machine.

So, given the inflexibility of it all, what happens next?

Well, first consider the last 230 years of American independence or so to be only a wrinkle in time, a drop in an endless sea. This helps to lose the prevailing perspectives of 'what is now shall always be' and allows us to view the social fabric

without national taints. After all, our world has witnessed the rise and fall of many 'never-ending' empires from Europe, Asia, South America and beyond, and a cultural exportation empire like America is susceptible to the same rules of the game.

Next we consider a few possible development routes. I've named three such future possibilities below: *The Searchers*, *Walled Garden* and *Think Again*.

Future 1: *The Searchers*

For a start, there is every chance that having had little joy in fingering the key culprits in Afghanistan, or the Bully from Baghdad, America and its keenly focussed machine will turn to other geographies. Syria, Iran and North Korea seem to make these unofficial intervention lists. And, a hell-bent leadership in the states might just ignore local sentiment in these environments,

succumbing instead to the view back home, where the vast majority of Americans see even their non-

supported military and political interventions as appropriate for a more secure world.

Of course, such a stalwart approach would only serve to breed more anti-American sentiment in the form of a backlash from non-supporting, international community members. The Americans, in turn, and building on an already insular focus, would begin to cite and increased need for even more intervention. In this future game, we can see decades worth of a growing tit for tat approach - a vicious cycle of trying to catch the bad guys with the actual result being that of breeding more of them along the way.

Future 2: *Walled Garden*

A second approach might see the world's remaining superpower continue to exert its

energies on the war against terrorism, only to find that enough is enough, or that the world backlash is too great to withstand. It is entirely plausible that a weary, but still unsatisfied America, might withdraw to a point of absolutely no intervention - at any cost. In this scenario, the US holds its borders and increases its insular focus, concentrating, at least in terrorist terms, in keeping Johnny Foreigner out.

This introspective development would have disastrous results for the home team. This is because there are enough factions of fully empowered people to make America potentially ungovernable without a single, unifying external cause to stand shoulder-to-shoulder against. Just look at abortion, gun control, the Kyoto Protocol, creationism and segregation as samples of potentially unsolvable problems - due to the strength of lobbies across the states. Now it was Honest Abe who said that a house divided cannot stand (actually

'Honest' took it right from the Bible - obviously, he knows a good quote when he steals one). No matter. In this instance, he is right. And no,

we won't see another bloody American Civil War, but what we might witness is some interesting and maybe irreparable fractures.

I could see California, taking a leaf from the Jimmy Buffett inspired residents of Key West, trying to secede from the union. I could envisage the deep south repainting that famous Mason & Dixon line and posting a few toll booth guards to keep the northerners at bay. At any rate, a divided house protecting its borders will build more internal borders, causing retrenchment further and further into pockets of Americana. Oddly, and from a Futures perspective, this action will have the effect of causing just as much backlash from the rest of the world as *The Searcher* scenario above. The feeling of having the yanks on the run will simply be exploited fully by

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others. This is already represented with Muslim extremists who having defeated the gigantic Russian bear in Afghanistan, feel invincible when facing the American eagle.

Take this scenario to the extreme and America resembles the written images of Neal Stephenson in *Snowcrash*, where factions such as the Mafia take on facets of normalcy like pizza delivery and the Federal Government is confined to a few gated communities in Washington DC and LA. This scenario is sort of a Domino Principle, I suppose, only with extra anchovies.

Future 3: Think Again

In my third potential way forward, and in contrast to the other two, we see a change of heart taking place in the US government. Someone, somehow furrows through the political machine, appeals instead to the inner politician of the most powerful office holder on the planet (by that time maybe a daughter of Bush, or Clinton?) and manages to remind them of the will of the people as the essence of governance.

This scenario requires that the empowered become the enlightened and eventually reach the conclusion that no amount of attack or retrenchment will change the shape of the argument, but that greater understanding might. Or to use my analogy at the outset, somebody starts mending the fences.

The set of actions we might see here are significant policy shifts in unifying world efforts like greenhouse emissions, more pacifist views when considering trade wars, institutionalising socially responsible aspects of the now transparent business world and of course, putting a chain on the interventions of US military and espionage bodies. I would also expect to see the view emerge that repairing communications with the Muslim world might take an investment in time, education and willpower of some 20 years or so - and not just some shock and awe campaign from the olive green brigade.

Oh yeah, just one more thing. Another element of this scenario is probably a regime change - only this time it is from within, and the wheels of Washington (and Texas) would feel it most.

So what *will* happen?

What is certain is that the first two scenarios are much more easily conducted and are the result of progressive developments along the lines of doing what has always been done. Thus, they might carry a greater likelihood. The latter future perspective is perhaps just too difficult to deal with and is inconsistent with the rather annoying fact that history does tend to repeat itself. Repeat itself.

Catch the cows? Mend the fence? Maybe.

Much like the Washington-based Futurist, we could just remove the animals altogether, plant some corn where the cows stood and wait for the winds of change. At least then, we could deal with some proper vegetables.

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