

Variations on a Theme #22

from Rich Lynch • for SFPA 234 • written in May-June-July 2003

I'm beginning this on August 18th, a bit more than one week from our Torcon vacation trip. The big news is that I've had some job assignment changes – the group I was working in, down in D.C., passed from existence, and my position (as well as the resources I was using) was taken over by a different group – one that I used to work for back in 1995-6, actually. As of about two weeks ago, I'm no longer working in D.C., in fact – I'm back out in Germantown, Maryland, which is a *lot* closer to home in terms of commute but no longer allows me to attend any of those luncheon seminars. The last two I did get to attend were at The Heritage Institute...

A Demonstration of the Art of Politic-Speak

The first of the two was a luncheon event today about the new Department of Homeland Security, and the main speaker was Michael Garcia, a former Federal prosecutor who is now Assistant Secretary in that Agency, and who is head of DHS's Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). ICE used to be the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) before that Agency became part of DHS, so the event was, in effect, a progress report, five months in, about ICE in particular and DHS in general.

There was a lot to tell, actually – ICE has all kinds of activities going on, from intelligence-gathering to pursuit to prosecution. You'd expect that they are active on the anti-terrorism front, of course, but they are also the point organization for investigation of so-called 'human cargo' cases, the smuggling of illegal immigrants into the country in shipping containers (which sometimes become death traps).

It was a prepared speech, very polished, and he went on and on and on about all the things ICE was doing. There was so much going on, in fact, that it presented an obvious opening for a question, as well as a chance to see if he was as sharp as he seemed to be. So when the Q&As began, I was recognized for a question and asked:

*"One of the headlines in **The Washington Post** today was that an attempt by Congressional Democrats to increase the funding of DHS had been defeated. In light of all the activities you described in your speech, do you believe that ICE in particular and DHS in general has sufficient funding to meet its mission?"*

As expected, he said yes. He replied that existing resources were sufficient, though they need to be used smarter and more efficiently. My question was actually a bit of a trap. If he'd instead shouted out, "Hell, no! More money is needed!" (which is most likely true) there would have been a new Assistant Secretary seated in his place maybe as early as the very next day – publicly disavowing the President's budget request, when you work in his organization, is usually a pretty good way to get fired.

There were no follow-ups to that by other questioners, though I kind of doubt very many people believed him. (I even saw the moderator do a half-chuckle.) But I don't really think Garcia was, well, lying – 'lying' isn't really the right word when there's direct marching orders on what you cannot say in public. Maybe a better way of putting it is that he was 'engaging in politic-speak'.

On my way out of the event, I decided that Mr. Garcia was way too slick and sharp to remain a menial Assistant Secretary for very much longer. I'm sure we'll see more of him later on, after he's out from under W's apron.

Where Europe Was when the Shit was Hitting the Fan, and Other Cop-outs

"A little Socratic clash never hurt anybody" said the moderator of the second luncheon forum, titled "How Europe Views America." The main speaker was an Italian journalist/editor, and he began his remarks by stating that the title of the event was a bit of a misnomer, since 'Europe' as an entity does not exist – the United States of America only has relations with the various *countries* of Europe, and the perception from over there is that this is America's preference. He went on to say that, in effect, 'Europe' as an entity was a long way from even coming into existence, at least as a political force (no matter what France and Germany would like to think). The coming-of-age of the Central and Eastern Europe republics, as they prepare for NATO and EU membership, brings many new agendas into the mix. This is much to the consternation of 'Old Europe' countries like France, which think of 'Europe' as a springboard to advance their own agendas.

Of course, much of the various European countries' agendas, as well as their views of America, have been colored recently by the events leading up to the Iraq war – the speaker remarked that in Europe, Saddam Hussein was never thought of as a threat, and there was great concern of what might follow when-and-if he was forcibly removed. And now that that has indeed happened, with the assistance of Bush's so-called 'Coalition of the Willing' (which included several of these C&EE republics), what's most likely to happen is a 'Coalition of the Unwilling', including France and Germany, which will play a part (for several years, it looks like) in stabilizing Iraq until a presumably democratic government finally gets its feet underneath itself. So, in his opinion, what's occurred is that the Iraq war has acted as a geopolitical indicator of sorts; it was obvious that the Bush administration was not really interested in any peaceful solution to the crisis, so the various countries of Europe had to decide what path they were going to take in terms of support or non-support of Bush's war plans.

All of this struck me as no doubt being true, at least up to a point. But, on the other hand, it was mostly the C&EE countries that decided to support the push for war, and I remember reading in the news about vague implied, veiled threats against some of the C&EE countries that support of the Bush war might possibly hurt their chances for accession into the EU. This made the speaker's remarks seem more than a bit hypocritical to me, especially when considering the rather bloody history of Europe over the past century. So, when the Q&As finally began, I asked:

"In light of the atrocities to civilian populations that occurred in Europe during World War Two, why is it that nobody in Europe was vocal about intervention in Iraq after all the atrocities that occurred to the Iraqi people in the 1980s and 1990s? Do you concede that if the world had lived up to its moral responsibilities back then, this current mess might well have been avoided?"

As you'd expect, I didn't get a straight answer; instead he rehashed what he'd said earlier about all the concern on what might follow Saddam, yadda yadda yadda. Somebody asked a somewhat similar question a few minutes later and received an answer that was an even greater cop-out: There's no need, we were told, for 'Europe' to make any really hard decisions, as it's almost an expectation that America will jump in and solve any problem that may require intervention. 'Europe' is now basically non-intervention by nature.

And that, I guess, is how 'Europe' *really* views America. Or so we'd been led to believe – I found it interesting that a respected Italian journalist had so willingly put himself in the position of defending 'Europe', its new geopolitical conservatism, and its all-too-willingness to look the other way when atrocities occur in order to preserve the status quo. I'm guessing Edmund Burke would have been appalled. Probably Socrates too, for that matter...

Mailing Comments: SFPA 234

Steve Hughes

On New Zealand: Interesting trip report. The only time I've been to new Zealand was for about two hours in 1999 when the Qantas L.A.-to-Melbourne flight had an intermediate stop in Auckland. Some day I'd like to see more than just the inside of the airport!

On the Maori: "I guess you could sum up their culture by saying that all it takes to make a Maori happy is someone or something to kill." They've got some very fierce war chants, too – did you have an opportunity to experience a "Haka" chant while you were there? (The New Zealand fans did one at the 1999 Melbourne Worldcon and it was attention-getting, even from a bunch of puny-looking fans.)

Ned Brooks

On Space Shuttle safety: "The Columbia could have been checked in orbit with an EVA, but ... EVAs are not without risk. And Shuttles don't carry a repair kit." When the Shuttles start flying again, no doubt there will be ways to inspect all surfaces from the orbiter itself. One thing they should perhaps consider, for any mission not already headed toward the International Space Station, is to launch the mission into the orbital plane of the ISS anyway, so they can rendezvous with the ISS as an alternative to a de-orbit if trouble develops.

Richard Dengrove

On Rachmaninoff: "I heard that the conductor who conducted Rachmaninoff's first piano concerto [while] drunk was none other than the famous Alexander Glazunov." First symphony, actually, but yes, it was Glazunov (who was a pretty good composer in his own right).

On building firewalls: "[Harry Warner's life] was more compartmentalized for mundanes than for us fans was probably due to ... [preventing] being ridiculed for that 'Buck Rogers' stuff. A great danger in ye olde days." We've reprinted, in the final issue of *Mimosa*, an article Harry wrote way back in 1958 that basically confirms your supposition. And as for building firewalls, some of us still do – nobody I work with, for instance, knows that Nicki and I have won a Hugo Award, and only a very few of them know that I've attended a science fiction convention. It's easier that way.

Arthur Hlavaty

On Roy Tackett: "I met him at Denvention in 1981, and enjoyed the meeting, but mostly I knew him on the printed page (and later, screen), where I always looked forward to his words." I got to meet him at the 1997 LoneStarCon, and by then he was pretty much wheelchair-bound, but he was having a good time as the Fan Guest. The half hour or so that he and I spent talking one afternoon there is one of my most lasting memories of the convention. I feel unfortunate not to have a HORT story to share with his friends, but there are enough of them from all his years in

fandom to keep us entertained whenever we hear one. I miss him, too.

Norm Metcalf

On Asimov's fiction: "My favorite Asimov novel is *Pebble in the Sky*. I think that *The Caves of Steel* is excellent but that *The Naked Sun* is a slightly lesser work." Agree with you about the two R. Daneel Olivaw novels, but believe it or not, I have still yet to read *Pebble in the Sky*. I think I started it once, but something came up and I had to put the book down, then never resumed. I have a treat waiting for me someday?

Sheila Strickland

On Harry Warner: "I don't suppose his columns on local history were ever collected and published." Not that I know of. It would probably be a good thing to do, but his entire estate now belongs to a church that appears to have gone out of its way to make a buck at the expense of Harry's written wishes. It would probably be difficult to come to any reasonable royalty agreement with them.

Guy Lillian

On Mount Everest: "Difficult to believe that 1200 people have followed in Hillary and Tenzing's footsteps." At the end of May, one of the cable TV channels we get here (OLN), televised ("Live on tape!") the last six hours of an ascent to the top of Everest by two guys who had lasted through a series of try-outs on a Reality Show series that selected an ascent team from 50 outdoors-types applicants. It was kinda, sorta interesting to see video from an actual ascent, but a little of that went a long way – mountain climbing is by no means a fast-action activity.

On classical music: "This little piece on Rachmaninoff is a gem." Thanks! It was actually easy to write; once I got into it, the words flowed. Of course, having the Rach3 playing as background music didn't hurt! Hope you liked the one on Gottschalk, too. (Next one will most likely be Dvořák, whose birthday is in early September.)

On potential worldcon bids: "2008 seems to be open; does D.C. have that much of a fandom anymore?" Sure we do. In fact, the local club, WSFA, is the host organization for this year's World Fantasy Convention. The fans here are only too aware that D.C. hasn't had a worldcon since 1974, but so far, at least, all the fans who would be the candidates to organize and chair a bid are not willing to put their lives on hold for several years in order to do so. One of them, the club treasurer, says he might be interested someday (and he's capable, too), but it wouldn't be until after he retired from his government job, somewhere around ten years from now.

On new space-going technology: "What do you think of the new design [for a next-generation space shuttle], with no external rockets?" Ask me again after it's flown a few times. Single-stage-to-orbit is a kind of holy grail for rocket science. Do-able, perhaps, but what do you sacrifice in lifting capability?

On movies: "The real issue is, will *Return of the King* win the big one?" It will have to be satisfied with the Hugo, I think. (But I'm hoping I'm wrong.)

Randy Cleary

On outdoor art shows: "My home town, Lexington, N.C., currently has decorative pig statues throughout town. Lexington is known for its barbecue and has an annual barbecue festival." This kind of art show is getting to be really popular. I heard that Baltimore had one a while back, featuring fish. It's a neat way to introduce local artists to the public, too.

Tom Feller

On Rachmaninoff and the movies: “Which of Rachmaninoff’s compositions figures so prominently in the movie *The Seven Year Itch*?” His second piano concerto, the one I referred to in my essay about him. It’s a superb composition in every respect.

Jeff Copeland

On historic aircraft: “The last surviving Boeing 307 Stratoliner ... [is] off to the new collection at the National Air and Space Museum.” Not the one in downtown D.C., though; that plane, along with some others like the “Enola Gay” B-29 bomber and one of the Concorde SSTs, will be out at the NASM annex at Dulles Airport in Virginia. It’s supposed to be open before the end of this year, and I’m looking forward to visiting it.

On web site appearance: “A cleaner way to implement the ‘it’s all one version’ decision [for the online version of *Mimosa*] is to provide a PDF version.” We’d thought about that, but it would have resulted in huge file sizes, which we thought might have discouraged people from downloading and maybe even run us up against our available web space limitation. What we’ll probably do is offer a no-columns version in addition to the two-column version (*M28* and *M29*, are in this format online now, since we didn’t use the two-column format in the printed versions, either). Eventually.

Janice Gelb

On the joys of home climate control: “I decided to try to upgrade to a multi-room, quiet unit. ... The bad news: the going price for installing wall unit a/cs is anywhere from \$275 to \$350!!! And the units themselves are only about \$350. ... So, I continue to sweat on the bad days.” We’re in an all-electric home here, complete with central-heat-and-air conditioning, and it’s very welcome on the hot days (which in this area are many during the summer). About two years ago, the unit was on the verge of breakdown (making noises and icing up from a Freon leak), so we decided to spend the money and nuke it for whole new system units, inside and out. About \$6,000 later, we had a system that was much, much better than the old, and much more efficient, too – we were very pleasantly surprised to see that our total electricity use every month, when compared to that same month the previous year, was fully one-third lower. I hadn’t realized how much money we’d been throwing away by continuing to run an old, inefficient unit. The pay-back looks to be about six or seven years – the return on investment is better than anything else in our savings portfolio!

Gary Brown

On reading speed: “My regular reading has been terrible in the last few years. I’ve managed to start a lot of books, but not finish them.” My reading speed is pretty low, too, and when you combine that with the fact that most of my reading is done the hour or so before bedtime, it’s entirely possible I now have a lifetime supply of unread books (though that won’t stop me from buying more, of course). I’ve been working on Neal Stephenson’s *Cryptonomicon* for more than two months, and I still have more than 100 pages left to go.

Toni & Hank Reinhardt

On politics: [Hank’s comments to me] “I hate to tell you this, but I don’t listen to [political] talk radio with any regularity.” Glad to hear that, Hank, but I never said that you did. “You

accuse Steve [Hughes] of a 'throwaway line' and request that he cite examples so that he can be taken seriously when he complains about political mud-slinging in the apa." And just what is wrong with asking people to be less vague? If there's a complaint about someone being too far over the top on any particular topic, I would rather the comment be directed at whoever the perceived culprit is, rather than taking a backhanded swipe at the apa as a whole. You, at least, do mention a specific example: "...Markstein's vicious comments to Toni..." which, as her husband, understandably would set you off. But I mostly ignore Markstein's SFPazines (go back a year or two ago to my two-page rantzine about him, if you're wondering why), and the less I have to do with him, the better. "But I note that *you* did not cite any examples when accusing conservatives of being mean and vicious." Oh really? How about (from my comment to you in *Variations* #20): "*Mean spirited and contemptibly vicious are terms I'd expect to see used to describe such right-wing nutbars as Bob Barr and any number of the conservative talk radio rabble rousers.*" Bob Barr, as you'll recall, was the clown who introduced an impeachment resolution against Bill Clinton right after Clinton was inaugurated in 1992. How's that for being mean and vicious? And as for the 'conservative talk radio rabble rousers', I'd say that's a pretty fair description. Rush Limbaugh making a personal attack on Chelsea Clinton, for instance, was more than a bit beyond the pale. To describe every excess that those guys have done over the years might result in a greater page count than all of SFPA from mailing 1 to date. "I suggest that you try reading the mailing more closely." I'm politely suggesting that you start reading my SFPazines a bit more closely and comment on things that I *actually* said, rather than things you imagined me to have said (or not said, in this case). No disrespect intended in this comment, Hank. And I'm not as far left-of-center in my politics as you probably think I am.

On classical music: [from Toni to me] "Looking forward to more music commentary." Glad you're enjoying it, and hope you liked the one about Gottschalk. Apologies for not having one in this SFPazine, but I still have some time before the deadline and I might be able to get another SFPazine written and sent off before then. Meanwhile, how about telling us about *your* exploration of classical music? Might make for an interesting essay.

And with that, I'm stopping at six pages. It's now well into August, actually, and I want to get this repro-ed and in the mail before we leave for Torcon. I'll try to do a follow-up SFPazine after we get back, with a Torcon report and some music commentary. Best wishes to all; stay safe and stay healthy.