

Grandpa Saw it All

The pursuit of Survival VS the pursuit of Greatness

By Gower D. Talley MBA

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When we think about the passage of time and changes in the human condition, we most often see it as a slow methodical march. We see the past inching forward, gradually becoming the future. We see a slow movement from the way things were – step by step - inching toward the way things are. We often use the cliché "the slow march of progress" to describe this seemingly glacial movement.

A little historical perspective will show us that this isn't true at all.

My Grandfather, Leonard Duane Talley (right), was born in 1903, and he passed away in 1997. My grandfather saw everything that we understand to be modern or technological come into being. Grandpa saw an increase in the standard of living of average people that was absolutely unprecedented. The changes that happened in his single lifetime were the most dramatic and remarkable in the history of the world. In a manner of speaking, my grandfather saw it all.



When my grandfather was born, the principal form of locomotion was animal power. At age twelve, my grandfather was the head of a large farm household. He farmed every day by hitching the team (of horses). My grandpa used agricultural methods that would not have been considered especially advanced by the ancient Egyptians or Romans. Until age 15, my grandfather had never moved any faster than an animal could carry him. Neither had his father, his father, or his – back for thousands of years. At age 15 Grandpa bought a Model T Ford – traveled at a rate of 45 miles an hour - and made a quantum leap past his ancestors.

When Grandpa wanted to light a room in the evening, something had to be burned. Grandpa's oil lamps would not have technically overwhelmed the builders of the Parthenon. Edison's creation of a workable electric light bulb had only happened 26 years before grandpa got here. It would still be several years before electric homes were common in the rural Midwest. Yet in his later years, my grandfather, like most of us, owned many devices that used lasers.

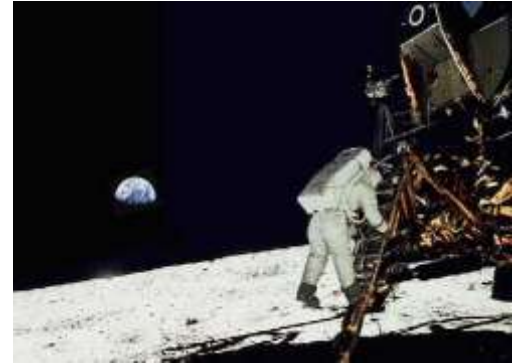
The first long distance phone connection was established in 1884 (only 19 years before Grandpa's birth) yet before grandpa passed away, he and I talked; he in Illinois, me in Europe and the call was digitally bounced off an object in space.



The concepts of computers didn't exist in any significant form until my grandpa was in his 40s (as a part of the WWII Manhattan Project). Yet my grandpa's final bank account was managed using the Internet.

The very year my grandfather was born, the Wright Brothers made their famous first flight in Kitty Hawk North Carolina. A mere 66 years later, my grandfather and I watched men fly to

and walk on the moon. We went from the first - single person flight on a wooden and canvas craft constructed with bicycle parts to computerized space flight – landing people on another celestial body and returning them safely home – in only 66 years.



So you see my friends, everything we have, the comforts that we couldn't live without, our society and our technology – our medicine, our communication, our transportation and our prosperity - are not the result of a slow methodical march through history. Everything was quite the same – for literally thousands of years. And then, all of a sudden, in a historical blink of an eye – everything changed. We went from an agrarian society dependent upon animal power to scrape an existence from the earth to a technological people capable of space travel in the span of one human lifetime. I do not mean to say that there was no progress at all throughout the millennia, but an ancient Egyptian transported 5000 years into the future to the 1600s would be subject to far less culture shock than an American of the early 1800s would that he were transported a mere 200 years forward into the United States of today.

The question here is why. And perhaps more importantly – why now? Why has this remarkable period of progress just taken place? Athens was every bit as advanced as colonial New York. Why were there no electric lights in the Parthenon? No city in the world of the 1700s was as advanced as Rome of 200 B.C. Why didn't gladiators fight on motorcycles? Why couldn't Caesar visit the outlying provinces on his private aircraft? Why has this century or so of incredible progress just happened now?



I believe that there is a one-word answer to all these questions. That word is freedom. Until very recently (from a historical perspective) the world believed in the divine right of kings. Up until only a few generations ago, every poet every painter, every scientist, architect, every builder, every creator of every type worked to fulfill the vision of some nobleman, emperor, king or collective. The great 15th century painters and scientists we know of today – we have records of not because of their great creations. We know who these people were in large part because of the importance of their patrons. If the king

didn't like or understand your work – it had no value. And obviously, these noblemen/patrons were not perusing progress for its own sake – they were seeking their own glory. If you were cutting edge and the king didn't understand your work – your work was disregarded. There is no way to know how many things and ideas have been invented, discarded and reinvented hundreds of times over the years because the ruler wasn't impressed. If one's discovery proved the king's beliefs on the subject wrong... well history has often had special rewards for those who sought to correct conventional wisdom. Galileo recanted his discoveries to save his life.

If you will look carefully, you will see that the concept of excellence for its own sake, the idea that people could, and in fact should pursue their own agenda for their own benefit, the idea that the principal unit of sovereignty is the individual human being, all these ideas are very new indeed. Freedom – the ability of each human to focus on what is best for themselves and their family – is the basis for all we have and is the basis for this remarkable period of progress. This type of freedom, that which is so critical to our way of life and which we take so much for granted is (from a historical perspective) brand new. The freedom that has existed in the human heart since the beginning of humanity had existed as a way of life only as long as the Great American Experiment. If you will look, you will see that almost all great 19th and 20th century creations came either from the United States or from some country that followed our successful example and converted to a U.S. type government based on individual freedom. Show me the great innovation created inside a monarchy. Point to the greatest contribution to the progress of the world created inside a communist or socialist country.

A tiny impoverished backwater English Colony became the greatest Nation State ever to exist on the planet Earth in just a few short generations because of this freedom. Not only has almost everything new been created here or because of what we did here, but through this freedom - we Americans have achieved a material prosperity undreamed of a century before. We STILL have the largest total Gross Domestic Product in the world by far. We have absolutely no competition in that statistic at all. Even if you look at per capita GDP (GDP divided by population) we are second only to Luxembourg, an old money principality with about the population of Oklahoma City. No nation even joins us on the per capita GDP top ten list with a population greater than New York City. The first major industrial Nation on the per capita GDP list other than the United States is Japan, who at #14 has a per capita GDP a full 31% less than the U.S.



In the United States we have to continually redefine the terms "hunger" and "poverty" for them to have any meaning here at all. No one starves in the United States. No one. The United States Department of Agriculture has defined "living in hunger" as missing more than one meal a month. (I miss several meals a week just because of work and scheduling – the Department of Agriculture would count me as part of the "Americans Living in Hunger" statistic) Today we talk about "food insecurity" – the fear that one might SOMEDAY miss a meal. Statisticians fiddle with the poverty line every year to keep it from going completely away. No longer does "poverty" mean lacking basic life necessities. There are people "living in poverty" in the U.S. who own two cars, their own home and a big screen T.V. The Department of Agriculture lists the greatest health problem among children living in poverty in the U.S. as obesity!

Do you have any idea how amazing this is to the rest of the world? Do you know that the average household income of an American who lives below the poverty line is greater than the average household income of any person living in Paris?

There was a joke in Soviet controlled Eastern Europe about our standard of living. It goes something like this – America: the only place in the world with fat poor people.

Incidentally – I am not saying that there is no need at all in the United States. Drug abuse, mental illness, illegitimacy and poor decision-making - take their toll here as elsewhere. My point is that in the United States, need is almost never based on lack of opportunity. My point is that two parent households (where both parents completed the free secondary education available to them, where neither parent has a criminal record and neither parent abuses drugs) who cannot find the means to scrape together life necessities -long term- are so rare as to be statistically non-existent.

The absolutely wonderful thing about our prosperity is that we have not achieved this greatness at the expense of any other nation. We take nothing and we give much. That which has made us great is free for the taking to any nation who would take it. Any country in the world could have what we have if they would only do what we do. Many nations have taken freedom, and have joined us in this incredible prosperity. Other nations confused the prize as being our wealth – missing the fact that freedom created our wealth. Some of these nations have challenged us militarily – seeking that wealth. These nations we defeated militarily – yet we did not conquer. After defeating these nations, we freely gave them the true prize – one they did not even understand that they were seeking. Today, countries such as Germany, Japan and the countries of the former Soviet Union join the family of free nations – creating prosperity for themselves that their grandparents could never have imagined.



No monarchy has ever created such innovation or such wealth. No socialist or communist country ever created such a high minimum standard of living. It appears that we have stumbled upon the right formula. Perhaps more accurately – a group of people 200 years ago stumbled on the right formula and gave it to us as a gift. That gift was freedom – accompanied by a governmental form with specific limits. We are a very young



country – but we have the oldest continually used Constitution on the planet. (Dozens of other countries have used our Constitution as the basis for developing their own.) Our Constitution is not a list of goodies that government will provide for us. This wouldn't have occurred to our countries founders. Our Constitution is a detailing of the structure of our government and a list of specific limits on that government. The limits are the key. Government is not omnipotent here. The true power lies in every individual. The key to our success is freedom – first, last and always. Freedom has brought us to where we are. Our government and our constitution exist only to provide structure to that freedom.

So what now? As of this writing I have a nine-year-old daughter. What if her granddaughter sits down to write about her? Will she see the world of her grandmother as impossibly poor and primitive – or will she look back 100 years and see very little change, or even maybe even a decline. That, my friends, depends in large part on us. Will we remember how we got to where we are? There is a growing tendency to want to trade our freedom for some imagined minimum level of government guaranteed material security. It is an easy thing to consider for people who have never known anything but freedom. This tendency scares me. This tendency scares me because in the history of the world it has never worked. Those who would trade freedom for security eventually have neither. Our freedom comes complete with the right to choose to do the wrong thing and fail. Protecting people from their own poor decisions would require that we take their freedom to succeed away from them. Too many Americans would make that bargain. They have no idea of what they would give up. They have no frame of reference for this decision. They have never been without freedom – they do not know what it means to live without freedom. Perhaps we should ask people in former Soviet Georgia or the Iraqi Kurds if they wish to trade their new freedom for their old security, their old guarantees. Freedom seems to mean more to those who had to earn it themselves.

Life has shown me that through the pursuit of excellence, security is assured, but in the pursuit of security, excellence is impossible. Our history is replete with figures who risked tomorrow's lunch for the chance, just maybe, to achieve greatness. We must not forget how they achieved their successes. All achievement comes with risk. If we demand to be completely insulated from risk – we are offering to give up our chance to achieve. This is not a trade I will make.

If we can remember the lessons of liberty given to us by this country's founders, if we can retain our spirit of adventure, if we teach these lessons to our children, then just maybe my great granddaughter will be writing about us while she is on vacation on another planet. If she remembers these lessons, if she seeks excellence for its own sake, if she takes joy in life – just because – and if she, in turn, teaches these lessons to her children, then perhaps she will lead her children and their children, to the stars.



Gower D Talley MBA

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If ye love wealth greater than liberty, the tranquility of servitude greater than the animating contest for freedom, go home from us in peace. We seek not your counsel, nor your arms. Crouch down and lick the hand that feeds you; May your chains set lightly upon you, and may posterity forget that ye were our countrymen.

—*Samuel Adams*

*"The Constitution only gives people the right to pursue happiness – you have to catch it yourself"
- on a Hershey bar wrapper.*