

The Power Game

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Rudyard Kipling, a writer whose poetry was often interlaced with political commentary, said that “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (*The Ballad of East and West*). Well, it would seem that sometimes this can apply to North and South as well.

The two largest economies in the Americas are the United States of America and Brazil which now share something else in common: possibly at present the hottest international political potato in the Americas, namely, Iran. Philosophically they are diametrically opposed to one another in their approach to Iran’s nuclear ambitions and when a political clash is not kept behind closed doors, self-esteem and dignity come to the fore. In my June column (*Brazil: The Future Arrives*) I wrote about Washington’s pique over Brazil’s lack of support for further sanctions against Iran which has its roots in Brasilia when back in March the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, sought Brazilian President Luiz Inácio da Silva’s support. Unconfirmed reports say that in that March meeting he accused the US of running the risk of military conflict by creating the stage for a second Iraq. If true the accusation could sour relations for some time to come such that a continuation of the impasse is likely which, worryingly, could lead to unintended consequences for an assertive, developed power and an emerging, but confident, one.

The United Kingdom’s successor on the world stage in the early part of the last century (and whose antecedents are rooted in the UK) was the US, which should now reflect on what direction its future might take at the beginning of this new century. If more attention to the views of others needs to be paid, so should Latin American countries avoid an attack of over-confidence (what I referred to as “a bombast bubble” in last month’s column) in their international dealings. Besides the uncertainty of next month’s presidential elections (although it does seem to be a two-horse race between José Serra and Dilma Rousseff) there is also the question of which direction Brazil’s new president will take the country.

Brazilians would do well to remember Stephan Zweig, not just for saying that theirs was the country of the future (see my June 2010 column), but for his raw example of unexpected change. In his sobering biography “*The World of Yesterday*” he recalled a golden age of security as a child during the beginning of globalisation which prefaced the tragedy and violence of two world wars. He describes how people in Vienna before the First World War had as “little belief in the possibility of wars between the peoples of Europe as there was in witches and ghosts”. Fathers then, like his, believed that boundaries between nations would eventually disappear but “now that the great storm has long since smashed it, we finally know that the world of security was naught but a castle of dreams; my parents lived in it as if it had been a house of stone”. Politicians, not just people, can be ambushed by events.

Insofar as the US goes, does it follow that a shared heritage can mean a shared fate? What is interesting about empires is that the more powerful they are, the more vulnerable they seem to feel. Even at the zenith of its power, the UK was forever fearful of losing it: invincibility had to be preserved at all costs. As Britain’s power declined and its empire ended, especially when India was given independence, fears about its future status drew comparisons with the fall of the Roman Empire. Today the same concerns echo across the US as scholars and commentators of all nationalities continue to compare it with imperial Rome. If the US today is imperialist by virtue of its power, rather than the territories it has conquered, one can understand the British historian Eric

Hobsbawm in his autobiography “Interesting Times” saying that we live in two countries these days, our own and the US. If this is true then history shows us that this will change.

Adam Smith said, “every empire aims at immortality” but like the Romans, the US has too many frontiers to protect, despite its military superiority. Abominable terrorist attacks, like those suffered in New York and Washington at the beginning of this century, pierce any sense of invincibility and then instil in every subsequent threat (great or small, actual or perceived) an exaggerated degree of danger. In addition to absorbing the horror of 9/11, what shocked Americans was the fact that such hatred would ever be directed towards the land of the free. In the 80s BC the Hellenistic King, Mithridates, instigated a (much larger) 9/11 when he asked his followers to kill all Roman citizens, naming a specific day for the massacre. 80,000 Romans in local communities in Greece were slaughtered and the Roman Empire was shaken to its roots by the atrocity, unable to comprehend how such a cold-blooded act could be directed at them.

If similarities can be drawn between Rome and Washington, however, the one fundamental difference is that, originally, the US was part of an empire which it then rebelled against. This reversal of status makes some Americans feel uncomfortable in the global role they find themselves in today whilst others do not accept that their country has the trappings of an empire. We can all argue about whether superpower and empire are interchangeable descriptions, with Gore Vidal, American author and provocateur, telling us that “no country has been as dominant culturally, economically, technologically or militarily in the history of the world since the Roman empire”. I, on the other hand, tend to heed the view of another American, Abraham Lincoln, who when asked how many legs a dog had if you call a tail a leg, said four because a tail is still a tail even if you call it a leg. But even if your position is benign, I think the late English historian, Arnold J. Toynbee’s remark was apposite: “America is a large friendly dog in a small room. Every time it wags its tail it knocks over a chair”. The late professor (not without his critics) regarded the use of

myths and metaphors as being of comparable value to factual data in his writings. I tend to agree with him and would add poetry as a useful source as well.

All of us have spoken much about recession in the last couple of years but I would like to suggest that copies of Rudyard Kipling’s poem “Recessional” be slipped into the jacket pockets of a few of the diplomats who will be attending this month’s United Nations General Assembly in New York. Although associated more with a church congregation going into recess at the end of a service, this particular recessional provides a message worthy of contemplation. Whether or not Percy Bysshe Shelley was right in his contention that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, Kipling voiced his concerns at the height of the British Empire’s influence that the country would be the architect of its own ruin if it did not guard against hubris, over-extension and global interference. Like the US should now, he wondered what direction his country might take. The repeated and haunting line of the poem written in 1897 is of equal relevance today: “Lest we forget – lest we forget”.

I have said that Latin American countries should not forget their past as we gradually leave behind what some have called, the Great Recession. We can all learn from it. Consider these words: “Their intention is to make loans to such imprudent people or by buying up their property to hope to increase their own wealth and influence” while “The moneymakers continue to inject the toxic sting of their loans wherever they can, and to ask for high rates of interest, with the result that the city becomes full of drones and paupers”.

I am writing this column as we near the third anniversary in August of the breakdown of the western banking model and if you thought those last comments (especially the reference to toxic loans) referred to the banking crisis you would be very wrong: that was Socrates speaking in Plato’s “The Republic” in 380 B.C. What better illustration of the potency of history? And which we should read more of – lest we forget.

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