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Oops!

A. Pierre Guillermin

“To err is human, to forgive divine”

“Nobody’s perfect”

“We all make mistakes, that’s why pencils have erasures.”

These are just some of the many expressions that recognize one of the continuing predicaments of the human condition- error. Unfortunately, there are many ways in which error has become ingrained in our government, science, medicine and the arts. Error has often changed history, crept into our libraries, altered our thoughts and affected our daily existence.

For example, In 1999 a survey of college seniors at 55 elite colleges and universities from Princeton to Stanford was conducted to determine the level of knowledge students at these institutions had about American history. The survey revealed that only 22 % knew that the words “government of the people, by the people, for the people ” are from the Gettysburg address. 40 % could not place the Civil war in the second half of the 19th century. Only 44 % could place Lincoln’s presidency in the period 1860-1880. 59 % thought Reconstruction was about the physical damage done by the Civil War. 25 % thought the Pilgrims signed the Magna Carta on the Mayflower. More than half thought John Marshall was the author of the Dred Scott decision (1857) or Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) or Roe vs. Wade (1973). 63 % did not know the Battle of the Bulge was in World War II. And to the question of who commanded American forces at Yorktown, the most frequent answer was Ulysses S. Grant.(1)

The greatest error in this situation is not that the students were misinformed (at least we trust that is not the case) but that they were not informed at all. Lynn Cheney, wife of the Vice-President and a highly respected educator in her own right , speaking to the

James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions said “One reason for this national memory loss is that there is little professional incentive for professors to teach general American history courses. Advancement in academia comes from publishing and there is little market in academic journals for articles on subjects that are broadly conceived.” (#1)

I am sure there are other reasons why students from some of our most prestigious institutions of higher learning did not do well on this survey, but it is not my purpose to focus on this issue other than to illustrate there are many facts we believe to be accurate which may not be.

Tonight we want to explore the lighter side of error, misinformation, and misconception, sometimes amusing, often times surprising, and definitely unpredictable in a world that has resulted too often from accidents, mistakes and misinformation.

Errors abound both in private and public life. Error; however, is not always bad, it sometimes leads to productive results: penicillin, x-rays, rubber, photography, electricity, and telescopes were all discovered by error.

Tonight is a presentation of actual incidents, stories, facts, profiles and statistics that reveal how prevalent is humanity's tendency to err and be misinformed. Tonight we will dare to “walk where angels fear to tread.” Therefore a word of caution, I would suggest that you not believe anything I say tonight unless you can verify it from a reliable source or you know it to be true. Although most of the illustrations have been checked against three or more sources I am not always sure what may be accurate or reliable. I hope that during our discussion you can shed some light on these subjects. Then too, be assured that nothing (to the best of my ability) is original with the presenter and if it is it is simply by error.

Since we have just celebrated the Thanksgiving and Christmas season lets begin with two stories. For years we have been told that the biggest shopping day of the year in America is the day after Thanksgiving. The day after Thanksgiving is the day that millions of Americans head for the malls to inaugurate the Christmas shopping season. It is known as "Black Friday" because it's the day retailers watch their balance sheets move out of the red and into the black. It has been cited as the busiest shopping day of the year. Although it may be the day the greatest number of shoppers traipse through the malls, it isn't the biggest day of the year in terms of dollars spent. Black Friday generally ranks as the fifth biggest sales day of the year or lower behind the four days comprising the two weekends before Christmas. Depending upon which day of the week Christmas falls, the highest sales day is usually either the last Saturday before Christmas or Dec. 23. (#5)

Speaking of Christmas, it has been said that the suicide rate increases significantly during the winter season. It is believed by many that the Christmas cheer pushes those teetering on the edge over the side. Studies indicate that the national suicide rates in December and January were either average or below average. In fact studies conclude that if holiday depression does descend every December, its effects are too minor or it involves too few people to show up in the official statistics. (#5)

HISTORICAL:

History is replete with pieces of apparent misinformation and misconceptions.

For example It was once thought ...and still is by many that Stonehenge was erected by the Druids. The idea was promoted in the seventeenth century by John Aubrey the biographer of Thomas Hobbs and it has persisted ever since. Even now there is a modern sect called the Ancient Order of Druids which annually celebrates

the solstice sunrise at Stonehenge. Stonehenge, it is believed is a Bronze Age creation, going back to the second millennium B.C. whereas the Druids of Britain were of the Iron Age, arriving there in the middle of the third century B.C more than a thousand years later. (#3)

Another misconception commonly held is that Julius Caesar was an Emperor of Rome. The fact of the matter is Julius Caesar was born on July 12 either in 100 B.C. or 102 B. C. He was assassinated on March 15,44 B.C. He was a famous Roman general, statesman, orator and writer. His best known work existing being his account of the Gallic Wars. His powers and genius was astounding. He was Consul five times and dictator four times but never Emperor though he might have been had he not been murdered. The all sufficient proof he was never emperor is the fact that the Roman Empire was not founded until 27 B.C. (17 years after his death). Augustus Caesar was the first Emperor. (#3)

To add to an error commonly held by many as illustrated in the such films as Gladiator and Quo Vadis, Romans did not give a thumbs up sign in the arena as an indication that the downed gladiator should be spared death or a thumbs down if he was to be slain. If the members of the audience wanted the loser slain, they extended their thumbs with fist clenched; if they wanted him spared; however, they simply clenched their thumbs in their fists so they did not show at all.

It is also interesting to note that neither the person nor the city most often associated with ancient Egypt was actually Egyptian at all –Cleopatra and Alexandria. There were actually seven women who reigned under the name "Cleopatra" although only one, the seventh and last made a considerable dent in history. And none of them was Egyptian. The Ptolemys who ruled Egypt for some 250 years were Macedonians. Nor, was Alexandria really an Egyptian

city, except for its location; its architecture, customs, language, dress and art were Greek. (#3)

Interestingly the signing of the Magna Carta, the event which so many hail as the first step to English democracy did not take place. The Magna Carta was not signed. It is even a matter of considerable doubt whether King John could write. It was however, "sealed. (O.K. I know this is just a play on words) (#3)

Just recently I heard a minister refer to the 95 theses Martin Luther nailed to the church door. Martin Luther's famous ninety-five theses were the opening gun of the Reformation, and it is recorded that he wrote them out and nailed them to the door of Castle church in Wittenburg, on October 31, 1517. This dramatic aspect of the story is in question; however, for Martin Luther, according to scholar Erwin Iserloh, did not nail them to the church door; he sent copies to a few selected friends. It is thought that the church door story was created by Melanchthon, a German Scholar and religious reformer who wrote a history of the life of Martin Luther. (#3)

All of us have heard the quotation: "That government is best which governs least." This quotation which occurs in the first sentence of Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" is often attributed to Thomas Jefferson. Occasionally that notion is corrected by showing, rather that it is from the masthead of the "Democratic Review" to which Thoreau contributed. Actually it is from Thomas Paine. Thoreau, it should be added, did not claim the remark was his.

And of all of us have heard the story of Nathan Hale's dying words. Nathan Hale is best remembered for saying on the gallows, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose (not "give") for my country." However, that is not what he said according to a discovered diary of Capt. Frederick Mackenzie, a British Officer

who was there and praises Hale for his courage records his last words as “It is the duty of every good officer to obey any orders given him by his commander-in-chief.”

When John Hancock affixed his famously large signature to the Declaration of Independence, it is said that he proclaimed” There, I guess King George will be able to read that.”

Although John Hancock’s bold signature on that document is a national symbol (indeed, his name is a synonym for the word-“signature”) Hancock remains among the least known of America’s founding fathers. Hancock was one of colonial America’s most ardent revolutionaries and greatest philanthropists, a nine- term governor of Massachusetts, president of the Continental Congress, and the first signer of the Declaration of Independence. Perhaps the tales of his defiant exclamations he supposedly uttered are based upon a couple of apparent historical misconceptions. One, that the purpose of the Declaration of Independence was to serve formal notice upon George III that the colonies were officially declaring themselves to be independent states (akin to declaring war) and the other that all the delegates to the congress signed the declaration on July 4, 1776. The delegates to the continental congress did not sign the document on the day it was adopted and the document was not addressed to King George nor was a copy delivered to him by Colonial representatives (although there was no doubt that he would eventually see it). Despite the impression created by the famous Benjamin West painting of the event, Hancock did not sign his name amidst a crowd of other delegates. When Hancock finally put his name to the Declaration, he did so in an empty Chamber. The only other person present was Charles Thomson, a Pennsylvania delegate who was also the secretary of the Congress. The rest of the delegates did not sign until August 2. (#5)

The popular notion that Lincoln wrote his most famous speech on the back of an envelope while enroute by train to Gettysburg is false or at least very questionable.. As William E. Barton says in *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1950).“ It would have been an incredible thing that Lincoln should make no preparation for an address to be delivered on such an occasion as the Gettysburg dedication.” The address was delivered on November 19, 1863. Lincoln started work on the first draft on Sunday November 8 almost two weeks before the event. He wrote, rewrote, and in all, there were to be five written drafts. It is possible (no one knows for sure) that he may, indeed, have continued the process of revision on the train. But he most certainly did not write it then nor did he use an “envelope” or any other kind of paper he might have picked up pick on a train; the speech was written on the kind of paper Lincoln regularly used in the White House.

I know all of us are familiar with the words: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your county” and the controversy that surrounded the origin of the phrase, but in all fairness to JFK it really depends on definition. The sentiment, as might be expected is not particularly novel; both Oliver Wendell Holmes“.... it is now the moment....to recall what our country has done for each of us, and ask ourselves, what can we do for our country in return.” and Warren G. Harding “...we must have a citizenship less concerned about what the government can do for it and more anxious about what it can do for the nation” expressed it, among others. But the catchy little inversion “ask not” appears to have been JFK’s and that is what, apparently caught the public fancy and thus, in a sense, does make the remark original with him.

Speaking of Presidents. It might be well to clarify the issue of who actually was the first President of the United States. George Washington was definitely not the first President of the United States. There were actually seven Presidents who are forgotten in history. Among whom was Richard Henry Lee.

The first President was John Hanson. He was the patriarch of a long line of American patriots who included a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a signer of the Constitution, a Governor of Maryland, and a member of Congress. The new country was actually formed on March 1, 1781 with the adoption of the Articles of Confederation. Once the signing of the document took place, a President was needed to run the country. John Hanson was chosen unanimously by Congress (which included George Washington). The Articles of Confederation only allowed a President to serve a one-year term during any three-year period. Why don't we even hear about the first seven Presidents of the United States? It's quite simple. The Articles of Confederation didn't work well. The individual states had too much power and nothing could be agreed upon. A new doctrine needed to be written-something we know as the Constitution. George Washington was the first President of the United States under the Constitution we follow today.

Is it true that during wartime the seal of the President of the United States is modified so that the eagle's head faces the opposite direction? This story surfaced almost a year ago when the "West Wing" TV series aired an episode where the United States was at war. The show mentioned that in times of war, the Presidential seals are replaced with an eagle whose head is turned toward the arrow. It is true that prior to 1945, the eagle on the presidential seal faced to the viewers right, towards the talon with arrows, while the eagle on the Great Seal faced the opposite direction. The presidential seal changed on October 25, 1945 when President Truman presented to the press a new presidential flag stating.... "This new flag faces the eagle toward the staff, which is looking to the front all the time when you are on the march, and also has him looking at the olive branch for peace, instead of the arrows for

war.” That shift in the eagle’s gaze was to be seen as symbolic of a nation both on the march and dedicated to peace.(#5)

SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY:

Facts in question do not rest solely with history. Science and Industry also has its share of misconception and misinformation . For example, when a large group of college students were asked the question : who was the inventor of the steam engine? Most replied - James Watt .Unfortunately according to the English, Watt did not invent the Steam Engine but he did greatly improve it. The Steam Engine was first invented by Edward Somerset, Marquis and Earl of Worcester in 1655. In 1761-2 Watt began a series of experiments which ended in 1763-64 improving the steam engine. In fact the monument of Watt in Westminster Abbey bears the inscription “James Watt, who directing the force of original genius early exercised in philosophic research to the improvement of the Steam Engine.” (#3)

The same misconception can also be said about the invention of the first automobile. The first automobile was neither invented nor produced in the United States by the Duryea’s, by Henry Ford, or by anybody else. Not even the second automobile, as a matter of fact, nor was it invented or produced in America. Actually the very first ancestor of the modern automobile goes back to 1771 and a frenchman (Nicolas Cugnot) who made a steam powered three-wheeler for the French minister of War. The milestone vehicle was built in Germany in 1889 by Gottlieb Daimler followed in the same year by Karl Benz. Modern Mass production and the invention of the modern industrial assembly line is credited to Henry Ford.

Then again the invention of the telescope is often attributed to Galileo. Unfortunately, that does not make it a fact. He was one of

the earliest users of the instrument but Hans Lippershey, a spectacle maker of Middleburg, Holland had made his telescope the year before and Galileo used this as the model for one he constructed in 1609. (#3)

Many things thought to be invented in Europe have since been found to date hundreds of years before originating in China. So it was with printing. The reinvention of printing and movable type (assuming that the Chinese printing had not then been heard of in Europe) is undoubtedly credited to Germany and John Gutenberg about 1450.

BUSINESS:

A well-loved urban legend (as we now refer to stories that are mistakenly accepted as fact and disseminated around the world) has it that a shabbily-dressed man mistreated by an uppity clerk returns the next day to buy out the establishment for the sheer pleasure of firing the ill-mannered service person is a tale that strikes a chord in all of us who have experienced some perceived mistreatment . This legend however, to the best of my knowledge and research has yet to come true. However, it is true that a bank teller's refusal to validate a .50 cent parking ticket led one well to do businessman to move his accounts elsewhere. So the next time the sales clerk mistreats you , tell him about John Barrier and the Washington State bank that refused to validate his parking ticket. John Barrier made his money buying and refurbishing old buildings. One day in October 1988 he was wearing his usual shabby clothes when he left his pickup truck in a nearby parking lot while he paid a visit to his broker, then cashed a check at the bank. Mr. Barrier than asked the teller to validate his parking ticket. The teller seeing Mr. Barrier in scruffy clothes refused. Mr. Barrier ask the teller to call the bank manager, who also refused. Barrier withdrew all his money and took it down the street to Seafirst Bank. The check he deposited was for one million dollars. (#5)

On the other hand in a reverse situation potato chips resulted from a cook's moments irritation at a customer and an act of spite led to the invention of one of the most popular snack foods of all time.

The potato chip was invented in 1853 by George Crum, who was head chef at Moon's Lake House, a resort in Saratoga Springs, New York. On that fateful day a customer had complained that Crum's french fries were "too thick and soggy" and "not salty enough." The angered cook set out to wreak some culinary vengeance. He sliced potatoes paper-thin, fried them to singed crisped brown, salted the living daylights out of them, and dumped them in front of the hard-to-please diner. The customer tried one, smiled, then helped himself to the rest of them. Thus were born Saratoga Chips. By the way Americans reportedly eat an average of six pounds of potato chips per person each year. (#5)

All of us are familiar with post-it notes and how they have become part of our culture but some may not know they were invented by mistake. Post-it-Notes were invented from a glue for which no one could find a use. In 1968 Dr. Spence Silver, a research scientist for 3-M came up with an unusual adhesive which unfortunately did not stick very strongly when coated on tape backings. In 1974 another 3-M product development researcher, Art Fry, applied the possibilities of this oddball adhesive (that wouldn't stick) to the problem he was having with his hymn book. Fry's bookmarks would flutter out between the services leaving this choir member scrambling for his place during the second service. A ray of inspiration struck him and back at his lab he tested a theory that this "unglue" would be the answer to his bookmark problem. The rest is history. By 1990 Post-it-Notes were one of the top selling office supply products in America. (#5)

LITERATURE:

Recently I was in the Lynchburg Public Library when I ran across a copy of the the "Saturday Evening Post." Two phrases which have been identified with the Saturday Evening Post from very nearly time in memorial are "An American Institution" and "Founded 1728 by Benjamin Franklin." Both phrases continue to appear on the "New" Post but it does not, did not , in fact never did have any connection whatsoever with Benjamin Franklin. The story that he founded the magazine, or any magazine which could be regarded as being even remotely an ancestor of the Post, was simply invented in 1897. It is true enough that in 1729 (not 1728), when Franklin was in his early twenties, he bought a mediocre newspaper, the Pennsylvania Gazette, which he then turned into a flourishing success. The Saturday Evening Post was the brainchild of Charles Alexander and Samuel Atkinson, two printers, who took over the printshop some years before. Therefore it happened the Post and the Gazette were both printed in the same shop. In 1897 Cyrus H.K. Curtis bought the Post and in some mysterious way over time the masthead sprouted the phrase founded in 1728 by Benjamin Franklin. It was never abandon even though there were many who were aware the claim was false. (#5)

Another interesting fact that surfaced during my travels into the world of misinformation concerned the distinguished detective, Sherlock Holmes.who was known for the famous phrase, "elementary my dear Watson." Unfortunately, at no point in any of the fifty-six short stories and four novels that Arthur Conan Doyle wrote about his famous detective does Holmes say "Elementary, my dear Watson." So I have been told.

LOST LEGENDS:

I would like to conclude our journey into the realm of error, mistakes, misinformation and happenstance with one more story that might be of interest to you.

Most Titanic buffs are familiar with one or more remarkable coincidences associated with the sinking of that ill-fated ocean liner. What many do not know is fourteen years earlier, a writer named Morgan Robertson had penned a novel entitled "Futility" about the largest and grandest ocean liner of its time-considered to be unsinkable because of her multiple water-tight compartments that could be sealed off automatically in case of emergency. which also sank after striking an iceberg. Numerous passengers lost their lives because the liner did not carry enough lifeboats to accommodate everyone. Demonstrating an eery prescience, Robertson had named his ship the Titan. (after the Titanic disaster, the novella was reissued as the "Wreck of the Titan").

A much lesser known, but no less remarkable coincidence is that at the very moment the Titanic struck an iceberg late in the evening of April 14, 1912 the film the "Poseidon Adventure"- a black and white film about the sinking of a large ocean liner -(an unusual production of 53 minutes in length in an era when the 10 minute one-reeler was still the norm)was being screened on board.

Finally, why did I choose to present a paper of this nature? The reason is very simple. In preparing for this address, I reviewed the titles of my previous presentations. In 1990 I spoke on the subject ROMANIA: THE INSIDE STORY, in 1993 my subject was EDUCATION: EMERGING FROM THE DARK AGES, my topic for 1996 was THE MATRYOSHKA CULTURE: AN INTRODUCTION INTO THE RUSSIAN SOUL , and in 1999 I spoke on THE FIFTH GOSPEL: LAND CLAIMS OF ISRAEL. Tonight, I decided it was time just to have some fun.

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5. URBAN LEGENDS REFERENCE PAGES (SNOPE.COM)
(Material used by special permission- January 2002)

All illustrations are gleaned from the above publications of which some are identified by numerical designations.

SPHEX: Q & A

Would you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. The day after Thanksgiving is the biggest shopping day of the year in America.
2. Suicide rates increase significantly during the winter season.
3. Stonehenge was erected by the Druids.
4. Julius Caesar was an Emperor of Rome.
6. Cleopatra was an Egyptian.
7. Romans gave the thumbs up sign to spare a gladiator's life
8. The signing of the Magna Carta did not occur.
9. Martin Luther's 95 theses were nailed to a church door.
10. Thomas Jefferson said: "The government is best which governs least."
11. Nathan Hale's last words before dying were "I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."
12. John Hancock when signing the Declaration of Independence said: "There, I guess King George will be able to read that."
13. Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg address on the back of an envelope.
14. The quote, "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country" did in fact originate with JFK
15. During a time of war the seal of the President of the United States is modified so the eagle's head faces the opposite direction.
16. James Watt invented the steam engine.
17. Galileo invented the telescope
18. Printing was invented in Germany
19. It is a true story that a man who was mistreated by a clerk, bought the business and fired the clerk.
20. Potato chips were created by mistake.
21. Post-it-notes were invented for a particular purpose..
22. Benjamin Franklin founded the magazine, "The Saturday Evening Post."
23. The detective Sherlock Holmes was famous for saying: "Elementary my dear Watson."
24. The movie "The Poseidon Adventure" was showing on board when the Titanic wrecked on an iceberg.
25. Richard Henry Lee was at one time the President of the United States.

TITANIC**Morgan Robertson's "Futility"**

At the bottom of this page is a link to the first couple of chapters in the book.

Here are some of the strange similarities between the book and the actual ship, they're much more impressive in table format:

Weird Similarities

Robertson's Titan		Actual Titanic
British	Country	British
800 feet	Length	882 feet
70,000 tons	Displacement	60,250 tons
24 knots	Top Speed	24 knots
3	# of Propellers	3 ⁺
19	# of watertight bulkheads	15
about 3,000	Capacity	about 3,000
2,000	Actual # of passengers aboard	2,200
24	# of lifeboats aboard	20
Starboard side forward	Area of damage	Starboard side forward
April	Month of disaster	April

Kind of strange, don't you think? Especially when you remember that the book was written 14 years before the disaster. When Robertson wrote *Futility*, there were no ships anywhere near the size of Titanic in use, or being built.

Even more weirdness courtesy of Morgan Robertson:

(This has a lot to do with World War II, and for the benefit of less enlightened readers, I've included some facts that adults will think of as common knowledge)

Robertson later wrote a book called "*Beyond the Spectrum*". In this book, he described a futuristic war fought with aircraft that carried what he called "sun bombs". These bombs were so powerful that with one brilliant flash of blinding light, one single bomb could destroy an entire city (much like a nuclear bomb). When this book was written, airplanes were still tiny, dangerous machines that could barely carry one man, and crashed frequently, and this was decades before the Germans started their "heavy water" experiments, trying to construct a nuclear device.

Robertson's future war begins in the month of December (much like the actual WW II, which began in December) when the Japanese stage a sneak attack on Hawaii. (WW II was started when the Japanese launched a sneak attack on an American base -Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii.)

Weird, to say the least. Who knows how in the world he came up with this "crazy" stuff at the

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