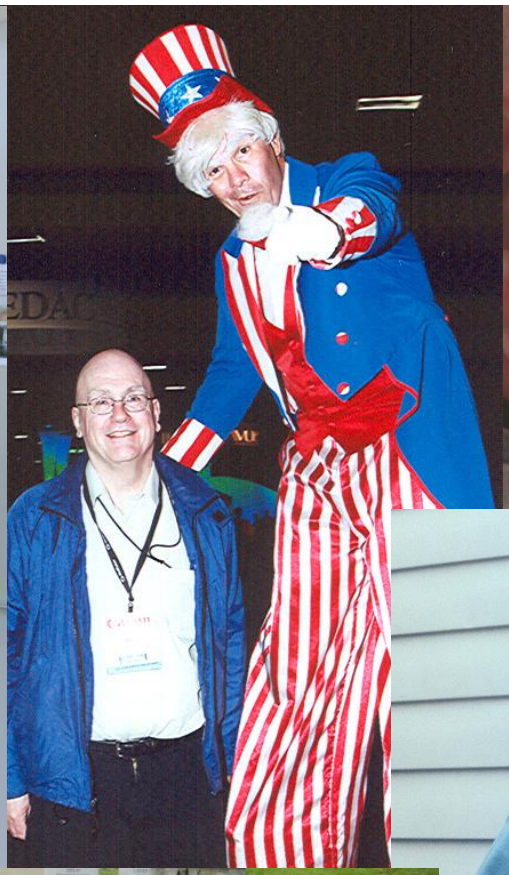

My Back Pages #8

Rich Lynch

My Back Pages #8

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

Well whattaya know, it's August again. Here in Maryland the coming of August means that we have to endure some of the most oppressive, sweltering weather of the year. But August also brings some things my wife Nicki and I look forward to: a new musical production at the regional Actors Equity theater in nearby Olney (this year it's *Little Shop of Horrors*), a pleasant evening at the Montgomery County Fair, the annual "1812 Concert" by the U.S. Army Concert Band at the Washington Monument, and usually some very young visitors (shown below).

And the coming of August also that means it's almost time for the annual World Science Fiction Convention. This year the Worldcon is in one of our favorite cities, Chicago, but last year, as you will read, it was in a place Nicki and I had never before visited.

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
August 2012

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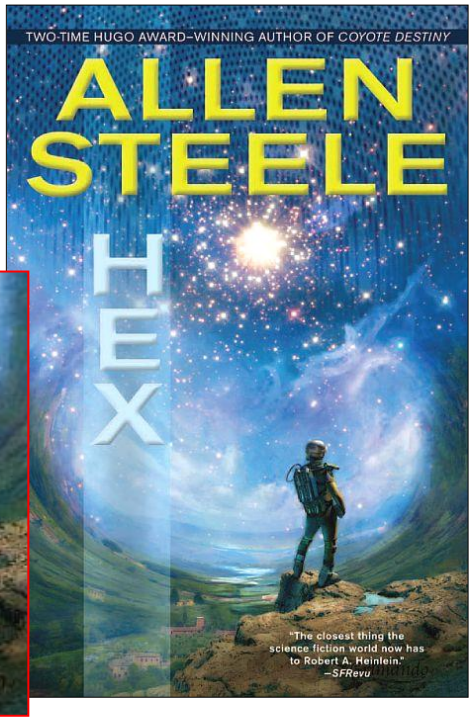
some of our August visitors

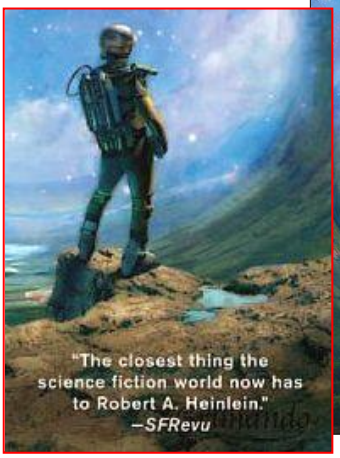
Worldcon 2011

Prolog: My Fifteen Minutes Are Not Yet Over



It was the final few hours of the final day of Renovation, the 2011 Worldcon, and I was taking a last stroll through the dealers room when I saw it.

The previous evening, my friend Allen Steele, who writes 'hard' science fiction the way it ought to be done, had won a Hugo Award for his novelette "The Emperor of Mars". Steele has gained quite a bit of visibility, both within and outside the science fiction community, with his series of novels about the colonization of the extrasolar world Coyote. I reviewed the third book in the series back in 2006 for the online magazine *SFRevu*, and was a bit disappointed that there were no reader comments to the review (none that I ever saw, anyway). One of the things I mentioned in the review was that Steele writes in much the same style as the great Robert A. Heinlein. I wrote that both Steele's and Heinlein's stories provide not only a strong and intelligent 'sense of wonder' that is characteristic of the science fiction genre, they also make sense from a socioeconomic aspect – things and events in their stories make down-to-earth sense to the reader, even if many of those them are not yet scientifically possible.



So I was surprised and amused when I saw that the newly-launched eighth book in the Coyote series, *Hex*, had a one-line excerpt from my review right there on the front cover. It was credited to the magazine, not me, but I'm nevertheless taking that as a sign that my Warholian fifteen minutes of fame are not yet over.

One thing though – another blurb, at the top of the book's cover, describes Allen Steele as a "two-time Hugo Award-winning author". They'll have to change that.

A Tale of Two (Capital) Cities

As of 2011 there have been 69 World Science Fiction Conventions, but until 2011 there has never been one in Reno, or for that matter, anywhere in the state of Nevada. It used to be that Worldcons were usually held in very large cities, partly because that's where the relatively large amount of hotel rooms and meeting space required for the convention were available, and partly because the large metro areas were home to stable fan communities that could stage such an event.

That's pretty much changed. There's now too much competition for convention space from professionally-run conventions for two-year bid cycle events like Worldcons to compete against them. And, in this age of the Internet, it's no longer necessary for a Worldcon committee to be

based in the city hosting the convention. Many mid-sized cities like Reno now have large and modern convention centers, and are welcoming of intermediate-sized conventions like Worldcons. That's what happened when the bid committee based in Portland came to the conclusion that a Worldcon was just not do-able in Oregon.

But a disadvantage of this new paradigm is that traveling to cities like Reno can be complicated. That's what Nicki and I discovered when we were making our Worldcon trip plans. Reno is not an airline hub and there were no reasonable airline connections to get there – every option we looked at involved a flight that departed Washington at an inconvenient time and included a long layover somewhere. In the end, we opted *not* to go to Reno. Instead, we flew non-stop into Sacramento and rented a car. It was a good idea, as Sacramento is a fairly easy two-and-a-half hour drive from Reno. And we'd always wanted to visit the capital of California.

Nicki and Alan inside the California State Capitol Building

One of our friends, Mark Linneman, lives in Sacramento and it turned out that another friend from Australia, Alan Stewart, was in town visiting him prior to them both leaving for Renovation. Mark had to work on our one full day in Sacramento, so Alan spent the day with us for some sightseeing and a bit of browsing through some of the antique stores and second-hand shops on the east side of the city.

The very scenic drive east to Reno from Sacramento takes you up and over the Sierra Nevada Mountains and passes not far from one of the more notorious historical sites of the region. Back in 1847, a small band of migrant settlers heading into California became snowbound for several months. Their provisions ran out and many died from starvation, but some survived by resorting to cannibalism. They were the Donner Party.

at Nevada's State Capitol in Carson City

An easy half hour drive south of Reno is Nevada's capital, Carson City. It was established just a few years after the Donner Party's misfortune, but it owes its existence to a discovery of gold and silver in the late 1850s at the famous Comstock Lode in nearby Virginia City. There is an exhibit about the history of Carson City inside the State Capitol Building, but what really caught our attention was the level of security there. Back in Sacramento we had to undergo an airport-style screening to gain entry into the California State Capitol Building. For the Nevada State Capitol we were able to just walk right in.

The Biggest Little City in the World

I'm not sure what I expected from Reno, but I do know my first impression was not entirely favorable. It might have had something to do with the interminable amount of time it takes to drive through the city center and what we saw there. Other than a few large casinos there were two main types of businesses – seedy-looking hotels and seedy-looking souvenir shops. The very slow procession through downtown made it easy to see that many of them were either going out of business or already out of business.

Reno's city center

Another thing a bit off-putting about the city, or more specifically its casinos, is that they are exempt from indoor smoke-free environment laws that make air breathable in most business establishments. The Peppermill Resort, where Nicki and I stayed, did not allow smoking inside the hotel or in restaurants but there was no wall where the hotel ended and the casino began, and to get to most of the restaurants you had to walk through the casino. Neither of us did any gambling while we were in Reno, but we did do a bit of people watching of those who were. Almost all of them were playing slot machines and from what we could see, none of them looked happy. For the entirety of our six days in Reno, we saw exactly one slot player smiling, and that was only for a few seconds. Most of them had expressions as if they just received grim news. We didn't observe a lot of payoffs from the slots, so in a way maybe they had!


the Peppermill Resort and Casino

But after a few days, Reno began to grow on us. The casino was a bit too much sensory overload, but the hotel was a really nice place to stay and the food at the restaurants was very good. And outside the hotel, the mountains were spectacular and the weather was glorious! The skies were so clear that we didn't see a single cloud until our last full day there. When the time finally came to head back to Sacramento our thinking had changed. Nicki and I decided that even though we probably wouldn't want to live there, someday we would like to return to "the biggest little city in the world".


Bananas Foster waffle for breakfast, yum!

Renovation...of the 'Best Fanzine' Hugo Award Category

Renovation's WSFS Business Meeting

But the main reason we had come all the way to Reno at all was to attend Renovation. In the months prior to the convention I had proposed an amendment to the World Science Fiction Society's constitution that narrowed the eligibility for the 'Best Fanzine' Hugo Award to publications that were actually fanzines. The good news is that the changes were adopted, but not before I endured six excruciating hours of WSFS Business Meeting. (The changes need to be re-ratified next year in Chicago for them to become permanent.) The even better news is that unlike the previous two years, the 'Best Fanzine' category was not hijacked this year by a podcast or a professional publication. *The Drink Tank*, an entertaining and frequently-published fanzine from Chris Garcia and James Bacon, eked out a narrow victory over last year's winning podcast, *StarShipSofa*.

Chris Garcia and his Hugo Award

Chris's and James's acceptance speech for their Hugo Award was the most entertaining and uplifting single moment of the convention, and I'm glad it was all captured on video. It included (a) Chris and James high-fiving everybody in the audience they passed on the way to the stage, (b) Chris being overcome by emotion at the podium, while James was doing what appeared to be a high-speed victory lap from the stage down to the audience and back up to the stage again, (c) James taking over at the podium as Chris tried to collect himself while sitting on the floor and hugging the Hugo trophy, and (d) everyone in the audience on their feet and cheering wildly. It was a *very* popular win for Chris and James, to say the least, and when the Awards Ceremony hosts finally reclaimed the stage they announced there were pretty good odds on what one of the 'Best Dramatic Presentation – Short Form' nominees would be for next year's Ceremony. They may very well be right!

A Dalek's-Eye View of Renovation

I did manage to do more at the convention than just participate in the WSFS Business Meeting. I was on five different panels, though as it turned out none of them were able to draw much of an audience. Nicki did a bit better – two of the panels she was on were media-related and for those the meeting rooms were full. There was no lack of media-related presence at the

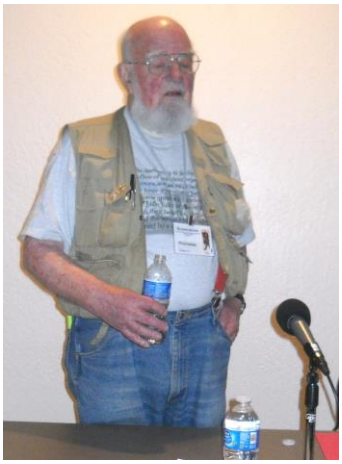
on the Iron Throne

Nicki and the Tiki Dalek

convention, including a reproduction of the Iron Throne from the HBO *Game of Thrones* miniseries. It was a *very* popular place for photo-ops. But only slightly less popular was a *Doctor Who* themed display that featured a Dalek constructed to look like it was taking a South Seas vacation.

Most of the people who attended Renovation *were* on vacation, of course, although those who were on the convention committee probably didn't feel that way. It takes a lot of effort to put on an event like this. That was impressed on us the day we arrived in Reno when we helped with the set-up for a special display of science fiction artwork that had belonged to our late friend Ken Moore. Ken had owned an exquisite art collection with paintings and drawings by many of the genre's most renowned artists and illustrators, and Renovation arranged for it to be shipped cross country for display at the convention. Another friend, Naomi Fisher, who was curator of the exhibit, had needed all the help she could get to get it set up in time and we had been happy to assist however we could.

Many of our friends were in Reno for Renovation, which is one of the biggest reasons that Nicki and I go to Worldcons – these are the only times that we get to see some of them. A case in point is Art Widner, one of the few people remaining who attended the very first Worldcon back in 1939. He was about a month shy of his 94th birthday the week of Renovation, which probably makes him the Oldest Living Fan. I spent a pleasant hour timebinding while watching Art's slide show presentation about an epic motorcar trip from Boston to the 1941 Worldcon in Denver and back. Only two years younger than Art is Dave Kyle, who is also one of the few remaining attendees of that 1939 Worldcon. Nicki and I had the pleasure and privilege to publish an extended series of remembrances by Dave in our fanzine *Mimosa*, but our connection to him is deeper than that – Dave lives in the far northern New York village of Potsdam. And it was there, as college students back in the autumn of 1972, Nicki and I first met.



Art Widner

Dave Kyle with
Steve & Sue Francis

Epilog: Nearly Four Decades Later

roommates once, friends forever

It's been a very long time since the early 1970s. When Nicki and I left Potsdam for Tennessee at the end of 1973, we also left behind the friends we made while attending college there. Some of them we've kept up with, some we do not know what became of them. For several years, one of the latter was Nicki's college roommate Carol. She and we were part of the college radio station crowd in Potsdam back in the early 1970s that became, in some ways, a large extended family.

We eventually learned that Carol had moved west after she graduated and had settled in... Reno! And so, on the second evening of Renovation, Nicki and Carol greeted each other for the first time in nearly four decades. It wasn't quite as if they had never lost touch, but it was close. Dinner was nonstop conversation, so much so that one meal together wasn't enough and we reconvened two nights later to pick up where we'd left off. Carol and her husband Jim are not science fiction fans, but they know enough about the genre that it was not uncomfortable to talk with them about what happens at a Worldcon.

In the end, I don't think that Carol and Jim were interested enough in science fiction conventions to investigate them further. But there is one that I do know. The friendship between Carol and Nicki is as strong as it ever was. It's just a little older, that's all.

On the flight home three days later, Nicki and I had many highlights of the trip to share but none as memorable as the long-delayed reunion. But the realization is there's a chance that more years will pass until the next time.

We'll have to change that. ☼

Afterword:

With our attendance at Renovation, Nicki and I have been to 26 of the 70 Worldcons. They haven't exactly blended together in my mind, but it helps to have written remembrances to fall back on.

But I don't have any trouble at all remembering the 1991 Chicago Worldcon, as it was also the occasion of our first Hugo Award nomination. But Chicon V was memorable for more than just that. It was perhaps the most congested fan gathering I've ever experienced, which made it mesmerizing in a human-kaleidoscopic way. The lucid moments with old friends were like islands of clarity in a sea of chaos. And it set the stage for an equally memorable convention that we attended just a few weeks later.

A Tale of Two Conventions

We suppose it's only natural that people we correspond with think of us as fanzine fans, since that's how many of you have come to know us. This fanzine and its predecessor, *Chat*, have provided us visibility to others who are interested in this particular kind of small press publication. And, in return, we've gotten to know quite a few of you pretty well, even if we haven't yet had the pleasure of actually meeting some of you in person.

However, it also wouldn't be wrong to classify us as convention fans. Before we ever did a single issue of *Chat*, we had been regularly attending science fiction conventions for over two years. We currently average about eight or nine conventions a year – pretty small by Tuckerian standards, but still probably well above the average for SF fandom.

Most of the conventions we go to are reasonably close by, but there are a few that we'll travel a long distance to attend. One of them, of course, is Midwestcon. It's now about four hours farther away than it used to be from Tennessee, but it would have to be a lot farther than that before we'd scratch it from our travel plans each year. Two other conventions that have become habits with us are about as much a contrast to each other as can possibly be – Worldcon and Corflu, the latter being, of course, a fanzine fans' convention.

And yet, we attend them for the same reason – they are two places we're likely to meet other fanzine fans and friends that we rarely get to see otherwise.

It was that very anticipation of getting together with friends that made us look forward to the long drive to Chicago for the 1991 Worldcon. We had discussed other means of getting there, like flying, but the drive didn't look difficult – just long – and it turned out we could save several hundred dollars by providing our own transportation.

So drive we did. We left home the day before the convention, with the intention of stopping over somewhere in Indiana or Ohio that night, leaving what we expected would be an easy drive to Chicago on the opening day of Chicon V. To get there, we took a southerly route through western Maryland, southern Pennsylvania, and central Ohio and Indiana. Besides avoiding hundreds of miles of toll roads, this would also allow us to visit an architectural marvel we'd been wanting to see for quite some time – Frank Lloyd Wright's "Fallingwater" house in southwestern Pennsylvania.

the Eastern Continental Divide on I-68 at Green Lantern Road (in western Maryland)

We stopped in Cumberland, Maryland for lunch, and to that point the drive had been pretty routine, but we were amused by all the science fictional references we had noticed along the way. One of the exits from Interstate 68 is M.V. Smith Road (no sign of any R.A. Heinlein Avenue though). Farther along, right where I-68 passes up and over the Eastern Continental Divide, we passed beneath Green Lantern Road (the day was pretty bright and no evil was in sight). The radio stations we listened to along the way were playing music as if they *knew* we were heading for a science fiction

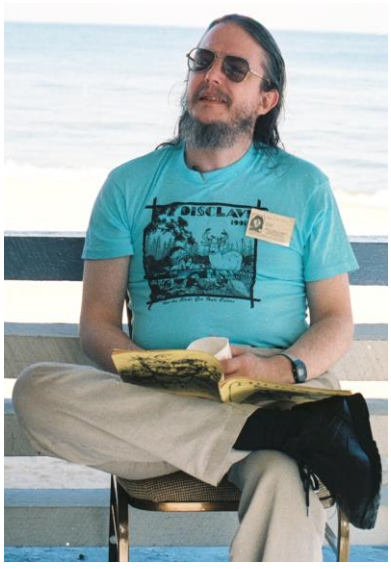
convention – the send-off we got as we left home was The Byrds' "Mr. Spaceman", just before we stopped for lunch we heard "2,000 Light Years from Home" by The Rolling Stones, and as we neared the turnoff for Fallingwater, there was Donovan and "Sunshine Superman".

Perhaps Donovan's other 1960s hit, "Mellow Yellow", might have been more appropriate at that point, though. The road to Fallingwater was two lane and narrow, and we were often trapped behind slow moving vehicles. On the one occasion where it was possible to pass, Dick eased the car out over the yellow line to have a look-see for oncoming traffic. Immediately there was a wet-sounding *squelch* from the road as if we were driving through congealing mud. Ulp! We looked at each other, then, with a feeling of dread, in our car's rear view mirrors. Sure enough, there was a yellow tire-mark trail on the road. A little farther on, the road-painting truck was parked in a turn-off, having just restriped the section of road we had traveled. We never did see any road crew setting out warning pylons; we suspect that the Pennsylvania state budget is so tight these days it's cheaper and easier just to let motorists find out for themselves.

Fallingwater

When we got to Fallingwater, we found a thick splattering of yellow paint along one side and near the bottom of our nice white car. Most of it is still there. It won't wash off, but Dick says it will flake off under his thumbnail, bit by bit. In fact, every time he goes out to drive it, he makes a point to flake off a little bit more of it. The rate he's going, he should be finished by, say, "In the Year 2525"...

Anyway, Fallingwater was spectacular, and lived up to our expectations, especially the magnificent view from the southwest atop a little ridge overlooking the creek that runs past the house. The rest of the way to Chicago presented no further difficulties, aside from long stretches of interstate repaving. We got as far as Springfield, Ohio that night, and made it to the convention the next day about an hour before opening ceremonies. It was time for the Worldcon First Fan Guessing Game.



Dan Hoey (at Ditto 4)

We play this little game every time we go to a Worldcon. The object is to correctly guess who the first fan we recognize will be. Past 'winners' have included people almost anyone would recognize (Moshe Feder and Marty Cantor), and people almost anyone wouldn't (George Wells and Ron Zukowski). Last year in Holland, the first fan we recognized at Confiction was Barry Newton, who lives only about 20 miles from here. We looked at each other in mock disbelief, then Dick said, "You mean we came to this convention just to meet *you*?"

This year, the 'winner' was Dan Hoey, who lives only slightly farther from us than does Barry. The odds of this happening two years in a row we figured was pretty steep. We didn't seem to find any omen from the fannish ghods in it, but Dick decided he'd better rush right out and buy an Illinois lottery ticket, just in case.

Actually, we didn't need too much luck during Chicon in finding people we had looked forward to seeing, but we weren't usually fortunate enough to be able to enjoy their company for more than relatively short periods of time. We were always able to connect up with friends for dinner or sightseeing, but never seemed to hang around with each other afterwards. This was true even beyond the bounds of the convention itself – we barely managed more than a hail and farewell for two old friends from Knoxville we met in the Chicago Institute of Art's restroom, before we had to move on (this gives a different kind of meaning to the parting phrase 'gotta go!')

the Art Institute of Chicago

The chaotic nature of Chicon was perhaps most typified by the nightly room parties. It used to be possible to find people you knew at Worldcon bid parties, and be able to sit down with them and talk for a while. It was something you looked forward to doing, in fact. No longer! Bid parties at Worldcons are now human pinball machines. You carom off people making your way to the bar for refreshments; your senses are assaulted by a kaleidoscope of sight and sound. It's impossible to understand anyone who is more than two feet away from you. The most extreme example of this was Winnipeg bid party, where people were ushered in one doorway of their suite to where beverages and snacks were being served; the press of incoming people then sort of extruded you out the other doorway. If you weren't quick with your hands, you didn't get anything to eat or drink. We don't know how anyone could be expected to find out anything about a Worldcon bid there.

One quiet innovation in bid parties we observed during Chicon was the *morning* parties served up by the Louisville and Atlanta Worldcon bids. This saved the cost of breakfast for those who could haul themselves out of bed before the crack of noon. (We had seen this done earlier at a regional convention, so it wasn't a totally new idea.) Louisville had a low-tech breakfast of cake and cookies while Atlanta went hi-tech with French toast. Unfortunately, the hotel wiring wasn't so hi-tech, and all the hot plates going at once caused their hotel suite's circuit breakers to trip with annoying frequency. Eventually, they did work it all out, and we hope this will become a new tradition at conventions everywhere.

Apart from the parties, other things we remember most about Chicon were the baseball game excursion we and about 20 other fans took to the new Comiskey Park (we even received scoreboard recognition, which probably left the other 40,000 people at the game wondering what a 'Chicon' was), the off-the-beaten-path location of the fanzine room (yet again), and our first Hugo Awards ceremony as nominees.

We weren't exactly surprised when we were notified in May that *Mimosa* would be appearing on the Chicon Hugo ballot. The year before, we had tied for seventh in nominating ballots, and two fanzines that finished higher were not published in 1990. On the other hand, we wouldn't have been upset if *Mimosa* hadn't been nominated – the reason we publish *Mimosa* has nothing to do with winning awards. Instead, the experience was mostly pleasant, a point we tried to bring across in the autobiographical sketch we were asked to write for the Hugo Ceremony booklet:

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DICK AND NICKI LYNCH, AVERAGE FANS

Even though we edit a general interest fanzine, we are somewhat unaccustomed to writing about ourselves, so this fannish autobiographical sketch will be mercifully short. For those who have never met us, Dick is the taller and the more rabid baseball fan, while Nicki is the comelier and the more artistically inclined. Although we are originally from New York State, we now live in the Washington, D.C. metro area, a far cry from southeastern Tennessee where we were living when we discovered fandom going on two decades ago. There, we were co-founders (along with a lot of people) of the now-defunct Chattanooga Science Fiction Association. Since then, we have been, individually or combined, active as convention chairs, fanzine publishers, amateur press association official editors, artists, and artist agents. We've also attended lots of conventions, although until the last three years, most of them have been in the mid-south USA. At one of them, the 1981 DeepSouthCon, we were honored with the Rebel Award "... for service to Southern Fandom."

All in all, though, we consider ourselves fairly ordinary fans – we own fewer books than Forry Ackerman, have fewer fanzines than Bruce Pelz, have attended fewer conventions than Bob Tucker, and have a *much* lower annual income than Jerry Pournelle, Inc. It's only our fanzine, *Mimosa*, that you Chicon V members have kindly informed us that is above average. And for that, you have our thanks and appreciation.

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1991 Hugo Award

It turned out that we weren't fortunate enough to win, but if nothing else, being seated in the nominees section gave us a better view of the proceedings. And one of the things we got a good look at was the actual Hugo Award itself (we were seated right next to Teddy Harvia, who won one). The rocket was made out of acrylic instead of metal this year, and was attached to a thin circular marble base by a hex nut that could easily be tightened or loosened by hand. The Chicon committee had designed the award for easy disassembly for packing and shipping. This was demonstrated to our amusement when one of the winners unscrewed the rocket from the base and stuffed it in his pocket. At that point, the fellow's female companion asked him, "Is that a Hugo in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?"

We *weren't* really very happy to see the convention wind down, even given the reality that it was by no means the best-run Worldcon we've been to. At times, organizational breakdowns affected many of the scheduled program events. One example was an unscheduled practice session for the Masquerade, which disrupted scheduled events for that ballroom the same day. Some events, most notably the opening and closing ceremonies, looked pitifully under-rehearsed. A few planned events, like the Worldcon bidders panel, were, by some oversight, omitted from the pocket program altogether and as a result never happened. The TAFF/DUFF Auction almost fell into this last category, but word-of-mouth publicity as well as some last-minute hand-lettered signs posted in the Program events area saved the day.

As we were driving home, we had lots of time to think back over the previous six days and talk about our individual highlights. We enjoyed seeing many of our friends again, many of whom contribute to *Mimosa*. We also made new acquaintances, like TAFF representative Pam Wells and first fandom member Erle Korshak. In spite of organizational breakdowns, real and perceived, it's really the people you meet that can make the difference between a subjectively 'good' and 'bad' convention. Using that as a yardstick, Chicon was a 'good' convention for us. We're happy we went, and we're happy we had the chance to see old friends and new, even though we wish we could have been in a more compact setting.

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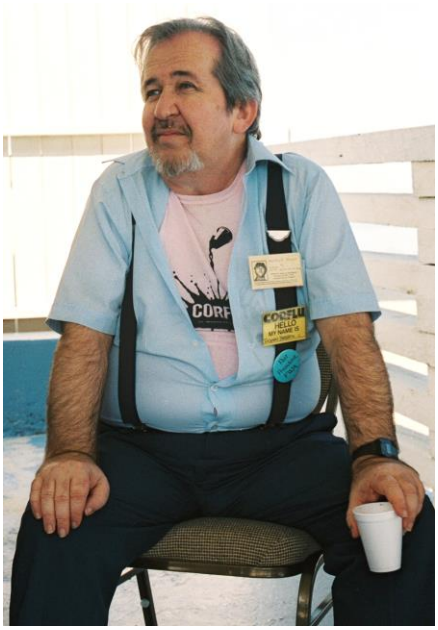
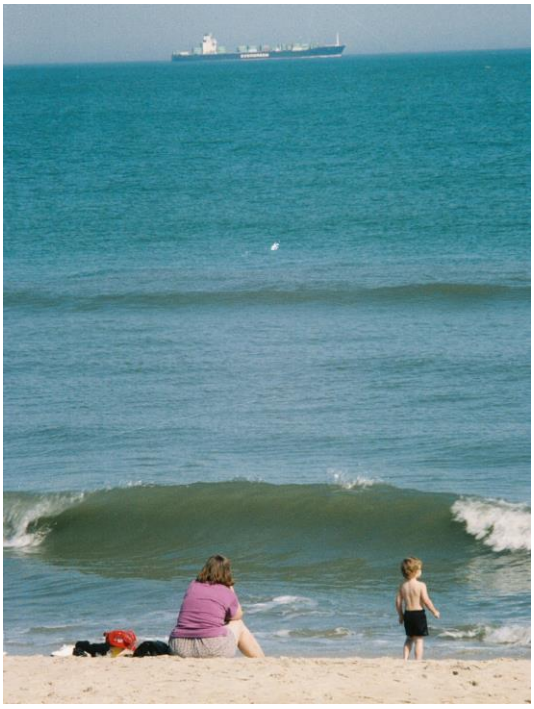


rich brown

That 'seeing old friends and new' wish came true for us a little over a month later, at Ditto 4, hosted by Cathy Doyle and Kip Williams in Virginia Beach; it was a convention as much unlike a Worldcon as can possibly be. Whereas Chicon had thousands of people in attendance, this convention had about thirty. Where Chicon tried to appeal to just about everyone, this convention was meant exclusively for the fanzine fan. Where Chicon had many different concurrent tracks of programming, this convention had less than one, and that consisted of sitting on a veranda looking out onto the Atlantic Ocean.

The Atlantic Ocean turned out to be the featured attraction of the convention. Mid October was well past the tourist season, so the beach was almost deserted. But the weather that weekend was unseasonably warm, and much of the convention's activities moved outdoors to the large patio area overlooking the beach. It was almost surreal, sitting in the warm sunshine talking about fanzine publishing with Ted White and rich brown, all the while watching big ships slowly sail out beyond where the ocean meets the sky.



the view from the patio

The nice weather that weekend also benefitted other events besides Ditto. Since the season was over, we expected Virginia Beach to be almost empty. Well, it wasn't – it was overrun with people getting married! The hotel we stayed at hosted several weddings each day we were there. Fortunately, we were on the 'non-wedding' floor and weren't bothered by all the partying. On Saturday night there were three weddings going on. One of them, at the older part of our hotel across the street from us, was an elaborate affair with a very loud country music band – we had no trouble hearing it from almost a

quarter of a mile away as we were walking back to the hotel's main entrance from the meeting rooms. That same night, another wedding party commandeered the hotel's rooftop restaurant for a private party. We fans could have probably joined any of the festivities, if we hadn't been dressed like…fans. Somehow, we didn't think "Jophan Says: Pub Your Ish" t-shirts would go unnoticed in the bride's reception line...

There was really no need to get involved in other people's parties, anyway. Cathy and Kip had gone out of their way to make sure the convention had enough refreshments to easily last the weekend. And there were no human pinball parties here! There was plenty of time to talk about fanzines and fan publishing, something we never seemed to be able to do very much of at Chicon. One recurring topic was the forthcoming new edition of Harry Warner, Jr.'s fan history of the 1950s, *A Wealth of Fable*. Dick had brought dozens of photos of past-era fans that he was trying to identify for possible use in the new edition. Several enjoyable hours were spent listening to Ted White, Roger Sims, and Bill Bowers provide identifications, and then tell stories involving many of the fans pictured in those photos. It was the stuff that fanzine articles are made from...

Bill Bowers

It seemed almost a shame when Sunday afternoon rolled around and it was time to leave for home. Ditto had been a nice counterpoint to Worldcon, and had banished some of the discontentment the chaos of Chicon had left with us.

In spite of all our travels this year, we're not in any danger of burnout. In fact, Corflu, the other fanzine fans' convention, is a mere 75 days (and a transcontinental plane ride) away as we write this. The convention committee is inviting several 1950s-era fanzine fans who live in the area. It'll be epic.

It'll be the stuff that fanzine articles are made from... ☼

Afterword:

Sharp-eyed readers will have noticed that back then I was going by a different variant of my first name. The version I use now, "Rich", is what my oldest sister has known me by since I was a college student. I've received Hugo Awards under three different variants of my name, which must be some kind of record, I guess.

Much has happened in the more than two decades since this piece saw print in *Mimosa*. The three people whose photographs from Ditto 4 appear in this article have died, as have two other friends (Bob Tucker and Bruce Pelz) who were referred to in our Chicon autobiographical sketch. I very much miss Bruce Pelz. With the lone exception of the great Forrest J Ackerman, Bruce more than anyone exemplified the meaning of FIAWOL – that "fandom is a way of life". He was a mature presence in many, many different sectors of science fiction fandom, and some of the aspects of modern-day Worldcons were originally his ideas. His passing was a huge loss, and earlier this year, on the tenth anniversary of his death, I wrote the following remembrance of him.

FIAWOL, or Perilously Close to It

Bruce Pelz at Magicon in 1992

It was the great Bob Tucker, who once said "I never found science fiction or fandom a way of life, but at times I probably came perilously close to it."

It was on May 9, 2002, that Los Angeles-area fan Matthew Tepper posted the following to an Internet newsgroup: "I have just returned from tonight's LASFS meeting. Larry Niven announced that Bruce Pelz died this afternoon." It was stunning news. Bruce's friendship had been one of the constants through the decades I'd been actively a science fiction fan; he was someone I looked forward to seeing, more than anybody else, at Worldcons.

Back at the end of the 1970s, it was Bruce's presence that had helped to nourish my interest in the history of SF fandom. One of the reasons that Nicki and I decided to publish *Mimosa*, a fanzine dedicated to fan history, was that Bruce and other fans that were active in the 1960s and before had enthralled us with entertaining and interesting stories about these past eras. In retrospect, we should have tried harder to get Bruce himself to write more about his decades in fandom − Bruce only preserved one of his stories in print for us, about a 1963 visit to the home of Robert A. Heinlein when he spent the night in Heinlein's Fallout Shelter.

It's getting so that every occasion that I meet up with an old friend I haven't seen in a long time, I feel I need to treasure the moment because there's a chance there might not be another time. I had never thought that about Bruce, though − he was a rock, a constant, someone whose presence I always took for granted. I cannot for sure even remember the very last time I spoke to him in person, though it was sometime during the 2001 Philadelphia Worldcon. It was probably when we went to dinner on the Saturday night of the convention. I remember that we shared about an hour's worth of pleasant conversation, on topics ranging from places in the world we wanted to go back to (he was a world traveler in his final years) to what we thought would make good fan history projects in the future (including my still incomplete 1960s fan history). It was there that he told me the story that he later put into print for *Mimosa*.

Bruce's passing was truly the end of an era. He may not have found fandom a way of life, but from my view he did come close to it. Bruce will without doubt be remembered as one of the most important and most influential fans of all time, and certainly as one of the most active. The list of his activities and accomplishments is enormous, covering almost every activity imaginable from convention running to costuming to fanzine collecting to organizing. He was active in fandom in six different decades. But more than anything else, he was a good friend.

I hope I am not the only one who will be remembering Bruce on the 10th anniversary of his passing. He was truly a fan for the ages. Ten years on, I am still missing him very much. I feel honored to have known him. ☼

Afterword:

Besides "FIAWOL", another frequently-used science fictional acronym is "TANSTAAFL" (for "There ain't no such thing as a free lunch"), which was originally popularized in Robert A. Heinlein's novel *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. But it turns out that once in a while, there *is*.

Thus We Refute Heinlein

There really *is* such a thing as a free lunch, no matter what Robert A. Heinlein believed. Some readers of this essay may recognize me as the coeditor of a now defunct fanzine, but when I'm not doing fan stuff like that I work for an Agency of the U.S. Government in Washington, DC. In a small office. In an ugly building. And without ever getting out very much to take advantage of or, sometimes, even know what goes on in the city around me. (I wasn't aware that Washington was under attack on nine-eleven until a news alert preempted the music on the classical music station I listen to.)

Anyway, at the beginning of 2003 I made an unofficial resolution all that was going to change, and that I was going to get out of my office more, if nothing else to at least take part in seminars and the like that various think tanks around the city often sponsor. One of these organizations is the Libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, whose mid-day book forums include a free buffet lunch.

To Globalize or Not to Globalize, That is the Question…

I'm not sure how I found out about these – my politics are anything but Libertarian, so it was probably from my contractor, who knows from experience how to locate free food events. The first one I attended was actually a debate between two university professors (who also had other affiliations and interests, to be sure – both had written books that were for sale and made sure we knew it) about the pros and cons of Globalization. Now, I happen to believe that Globalization is mostly a good thing, or at least is something that has far more pluses than minuses. I managed to get called on for the very first question and directed it at the mostly-anti-Globalization speaker:

Cato Institute in Washington, D.C.

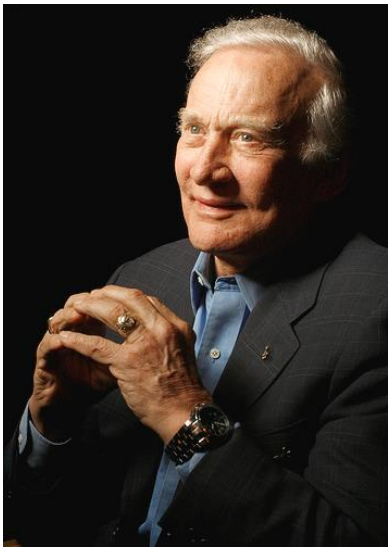
"If companies like Coca-Cola and McDonald's can be accused at bringing cultural homogenization [as he had contended] *to the non-western world, how come the anti-Globalists are not railing against an even greater such cultural homogenization force – the Internet? The only entities that seem to do that are countries like China, which have their own agendas to protect. Could it not be said, therefore, that many if not most people and organizations who claim to be anti-Globalization are doing so because they also have their own separate agendas to advance?"*

But what I got back wasn't an answer, just a diatribe against the Internet itself, and how it's increased the likelihood of school kids being exposed to pornography, etc. etc. In short, I got sloughed off.

Afterwards, at the deli buffet luncheon, I was hoping to do a little schmoozing and make a few more contacts, but people seemed to be more interested in chowing down. I'm guessing that if

lunch wasn't part of the program, the turnout might have been much smaller, perhaps embarrassingly so. I have to admit, the chocolate chip cookies *were* world-class!

Lunch with Buzz



Buzz Aldrin

I counted that outing as a qualified success because the event was of interest, the food was good, and I even got a chance to vent some job-induced hostility by asking a politely snarky question to one of the speakers. The next time I went to a Cato luncheon book forum, I got another chance, and even 15 ~~minutes~~ seconds of fame as I was on national TV, coast-to-coast, for about that long. The topic of the forum was *Space: The Free-Market Frontier*, and it featured Apollo 11 astronaut Buzz Aldrin as one of the panelists along with three policy-types, one of them from NASA. C-SPAN was there, no doubt because of the presence of Aldrin, and they were televising the event on one of their channels.

Everybody but the NASA guy spoke of how much better things would be, in terms of access to space, if only NASA and the rest of the U.S. Government hadn't strangled private enterprise's budding interest. Aldrin used his time to promote some of his ideas for easier and cheaper access to orbit (his part of the program almost seemed like he was presenting a proposal, and in a way, I guess he was, to the public). At the end, they had time for a few questions, and mine was the last one they took before the program ended. I'd gotten there early and had a seat in the front row, so when I stood up to ask my question, there the TV camera was, pointing at me from about five feet away and bringing me to thousands of viewers across the country. (Oh, the power of the moment!) I actually asked an intelligent question, concerning the need for better justification for manned spaceflight than what's been tossed out at us for the past 40 years. One of the other speakers had thrown out a few ideas that he claimed would bring commercial benefits, and one of the tired old chestnuts he'd brought out again was that: "Space could help guarantee cheap and unlimited sources of clean energy."

However, the sad truth of the situation is: In a pig's eye it can! At least, in any foreseeable future. I tried to point this out with my question:

"The most recent study I've read, from several years ago, concluded that a solar power satellite for beaming power down to earth would cost about $1 million per installed kilowatt, in terms of capital costs. This is a full three orders of magnitude *greater than conventional earth-based power plants. You've already mentioned that, for solar energy collectors to be commercial viable, launch costs would have to drop by as much as two orders of magnitude, from about $10,000 per pound to $100 per pound. In my mind, that's not nearly enough; to get the SPS costs economically competitive, the cost-to-orbit would also somehow have to come down that third order of magnitude, to $10 per pound. But you can't even get Federal Express to deliver for $10 per pound, so how can you expect the SPS concept to ever become commercially interesting?"*

I didn't get a straight answer, but I guess I didn't really expect one. The speaker remarked there could be some newer ideas for power generation that weren't so capital intensive, and the program ended before I could try to wedge in a follow-up. At the luncheon afterwards, I got to talk to Aldrin for a few moments (he was kept mostly busy signing books and being photographed), and asked him what the cost-to-orbit for his space booster concept was. Turns out

the numbers have never been run – he replied that what his company was proposing was to progressively improve the launch hardware that's being used now; the implication was that the economics would take care of itself.

All in all, the event was interesting but more than a bit unfulfilling. I really didn't learn very much, but just being in such a media-sponsored forum where I could actually talk to Buzz Aldrin was a neat thing. Back in the summer of 1969, I never would have believed I'd have such an opportunity. For me, I guess the day's event came out mostly like what Marshall McLuhan had claimed; it really wasn't the information that was important, it was the medium that was the message.

How Best to Exit Iraq, and Other Obfuscations

Most of the Cato events are held at their own rather nice building on Massachusetts Avenue. (I work in what must be the ugliest building in Washington, but don't get me started on that!) Being a think tank, though, they often try to influence Congress, and what better place to do that but up on Capitol Hill. At the beginning of May, while the Iraq War was still in progress, they held one titled "After Victory: A Strategy for Exiting the Persian Gulf," in the House Rayburn Office Building, more than a little for the benefit of Congresspeople and their staffers. The two speakers (both from Cato) made the point that it was not in anybody's best interests for the U.S. military to have any significant presence in the Middle East now that the Iraq adventure seemed to be about to wind down.

They actually made a few good points – it costs somewhere around $50 billion a year for what is essentially a mission to safeguard Saudi and Kuwaiti oil. This, despite the fact that only about 15% of U.S. oil supplies come from the Middle East. A large military presence over there might in fact even be detrimental; the former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia has gone on the record as saying the probability of further terrorism is "an inescapable consequence of the role we have assigned to ourselves as the principle guarantor of security and stability in the region."

Much of the event sounded like a broken record; neither of the speakers had anything bad to say about the war itself – indeed, it was actually praised as a means of ridding the world of a tyrannical regime, though they conceded that what eventually will follow in its place might not be something that we would be happy with. When they were done, I got to ask the first question (and with it, got another 15 seconds on national TV, though I think this time it was a delayed broadcast) – neither of the speakers, in their presentations, had ever mentioned the original and supposedly primary reason for bringing in the combined might of the American and British military to kick Saddam's ass. And so I asked:

"I noticed that neither of the speakers mentioned, even once, the four words that were supposedly the justification for this war: weapons of mass destruction. None were used against U.S. or British forces during the war, and none have been found yet. It's not altogether beyond the realm of possibility that none will ever *be found. On the other hand, I do concede that one less maniacal tyrant in the world is a good thing, so do you think it's possible that the war with Iraq could have been, in the long run, the right thing to do, but for all the wrong reasons?"*

I was hoping at least one of the speakers would be willing to take this point on, but it was not to be – if anything, they climbed even higher on the soapbox with both of them agreeing that, OK, we should get out of the region as soon as possible, but not until we've uncovered the stash of WMD that we *know* exists somewhere. (I think they were expecting a question like that.)

Weird Science

The Cato Institute isn't the only think tank in Washington that's giving out free lunches. There's another one, the George C. Marshall Institute, whose stated mission (according to their web site) is to "encourage the use of sound science in making public policy about important issues for which science and technology are major considerations." That sounded a wee bit pretentious to me, so I started attending some of their luncheon seminars, in hopes that they also would provide me some chances to do a little rabble-rousing. My first opportunity came at an event titled "Lessons and Limits of Climate History: Was the 20th Century Climate Unusual?" which was held up on Capitol Hill, in the Dirksen Senate Office Building so as to, again, attract the attention of lawmakers and their staffers (which it did). The presenter, a physicist from the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, had co-written a paper that took dead aim at the often-heard claim that the 20th century was the warmest of the past millennium; his presentation (which largely consisted of eye-glazingly numerous time series graphs of temperatures at various places on earth) tried to support the claim that there was, in fact, nothing very unusual about the temperature record of the fossil fuel era of mankind relative to previous centuries. The implication of this, of course, is that global warming is actually just a bunch of hooey, and that it might well be that we could dump as much carbon dioxide as we wanted into the atmosphere without any significant deleterious effects.

Personally, I doubt this is true. One only has to look sunward about 30 million miles to see what an albeit ultra-extreme greenhouse effect has accomplished. So, when he was finished, I got to ask the first question:

"It seems to me that it's mostly irrelevant what earth's past temperature trends were, or whether or not they can be correlated with fossil fuel use. There can be no doubt *that global warming would happen at some point – the planet Venus is an ultra-extreme example of that. The question ought to be, then, how* much *of an increase of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases can the earth's atmosphere tolerate before significant macroscopic climate effects begin to occur?"*

I guess I didn't word it innocently enough, because both the event's moderator and the speaker treated it as a hostile question – and I didn't even get very much of a response because they felt I'd asked a question outside the scope of the presentation. So my question was, in effect, declared out of order.

Most of the people attending the event had their own agendas, of course – many were congressional staffers (the lady I sat next to was a lawyer on the staff of the conservative Republican senator Ted Stevens of Alaska) and most of the rest were lobbyists of various flavors. (There was an energy bill working its way through Congress at the time, and every so often a few Global Warming-related amendments were coming up for vote.) There were also some liberal organizations present, including Greenpeace, who distributed an "informational" flyer that took dead aim of its own, at both the speaker and the Marshall Institute. Here's a sampling:

"[Speaker's name] has spent most of the last decade trying to disprove the occurrence of global warming. He has written countless articles on how an increase in carbon dioxide has no harmful effects on global climate. … A closer look at the George C. Marshall Institute's funding sources reveals a clear obstacle in the way of [its] pursuit of partial and 'independent' science. The Institute has taken $140,000 in the past 2 years for the climate science work from ExxonMobil alone. ExxonMobil actively donates to organizations like the George Marshall Institute to actively sabotage actions on … the very real problem of global warming. When reports from [the Speaker] are presented under the auspices of groups like the Marshall Institute, it is not science with integrity. Rather, it is Exxon's junk science presented as unbiased science."

In the end, I doubt anybody who was there had their minds changed about anything. As for me, I'd like to think that I have an open mind – there *actually is* quite a bit that isn't known, or at least, isn't known well enough, to make all the climate models track accurately. It might well be that the global climate is much more forgiving than we have any right to expect. (Or, it might be that The End is just around the corner.)

There is No Direction in Space

There's been only one other Marshall Institute luncheon event I've so far been to, and that one was much less controversial and much more entertaining than that Global Warming dog and pony show. This one featured a speech by noted space historian James Oberg titled "Toward a Theory of Space Power" which had been billed as an overview on possible ways of evaluating competing options for national space policy. Oberg didn't really keep very close to the topic, which made it a rambling but much more entertaining event – we learned, for instance, that U.S. military intelligence people once monitored reports of UFO sightings in Soviet newspapers as indication of Soviet rocket launches and satellite recovery operations, and that the Russian cosmonauts on the International Space Station have a malevolent-looking handgun up there in the Soyuz return capsule as part of their survival kit. (Read into that what you will.)

James Oberg

Several years ago, Oberg had been commissioned by the U.S. Space Command to compile concepts of 'space power' (the military analogy of 'air power'), but what he found was that it was a nebulous concept at best – in space, analogies tend to break down rather than be reinforced. For example, space is actually anything but 'high ground' in a military sense – anything up there is totally defenseless to attack and moves in a highly predictable path. His conclusion was that there was at present no way to really determine what the proper direction for space policy should be, and: "Without … a quantitative measure of 'goodness' of policy, contesting options are championed and chosen based on ego, instinct, aesthetics, sex appeal, short-term political gain, misperceived historical analogies, protection of past investments, external requirements, whim and whimsy – and even by default or randomly. From time to time the choices turn out to be correct, but we need to improve the odds."

All that pretty much supported what I'd thought all along about the rampant benign cluelessness on what could and should be accomplished with all the money that's being spent for space-related activities. When we finally got to the Q&A session following his talk, I asked an only marginally snarky question to confirm that I was reading him correctly.

Me: *"You are well-known as a futurist, so could you get out your crystal ball and perhaps make a prediction of what we can expect in the next ten years?"*

His answer: *"No."*

After the Q&A ended, he came over to me to apologize for his curt answer, but I smiled and told him that actually, his answer spoke volumes. Back in the 1960s there would have been no doubt what the answer to that question would have been. The original Space Race, he replied, was a product of fear. He said that if the Chinese put men in space soon, as seemed likely then (and which eventually did happen), it would not produce the same result. (He thought it would mostly be ignored, which it largely has been.)

Oberg is a thought-provoking speaker, and I didn't make it through the event without some of my own conceptions about space being at least partly turned into misconceptions. I'd always thought, for instance, that one of the major goals of rocketry research was to find ways of reducing the cost of getting things into earth orbit. But, he said, in today's world that might not be altogether that great an idea – there might actually be some incentive to keep launch costs, er, sky-high to prevent things from getting put in earth orbit that you'd really not want to be there. Just launching a load of sand into the proper trajectory, for instance, could take out orbiting satellites or even an orbiting space station. He also mentioned that the Law of Unintended Consequences came into play many times in the history of the Space Age – one of these was when the U.S. Space Shuttle was developed. The Soviets had to have one too, to maintain international prestige, so they spent about $10 billion that they couldn't afford in developing one, which bankrupted their space program. The Buran shuttle turned out to be useless to them, it flew only once, and it was eventually destroyed when the roof of the hangar where it was stored fell in on it.

As for the luncheon itself…superb! It was a sit-down affair, and I had a salmon fillet open-faced sandwich with several side salads and a nice fruit tart for dessert. And it was all free! Heinlein, I think, would have been appalled.

My New Aspiration

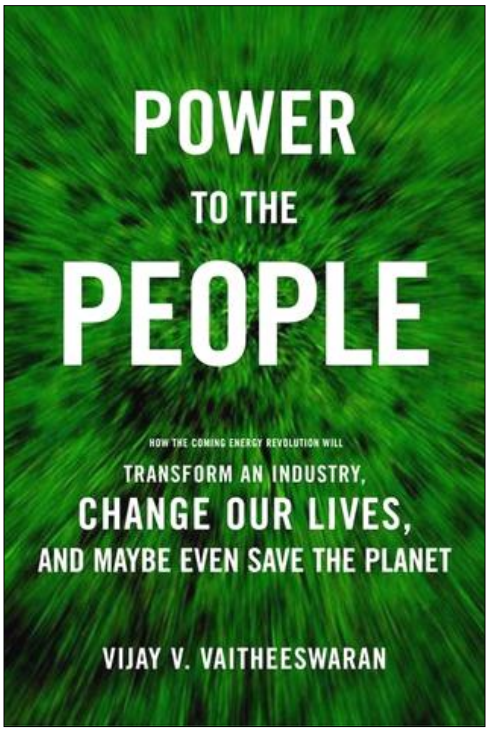
After a while I found that I was becoming a recognizable face at these events. I attended a Cato luncheon forum on "The Company: A Short History of a Revolutionary Idea" (which was pretty interesting – the so-called 'limited liability company' was, and still is, one of the most important tools for creating modern Western society). At the buffet luncheon following the forum, a woman walked over to me and complimented me on my question at the previous week's "Space: The Free Market Frontier" forum. I told her that I hadn't asked a question at the current forum because I couldn't think of one that was pointed enough. And at that she laughed and told me that in some of the past Cato forums there had been questions so finely honed that the persons asking them had been requested to leave!

Gosh, a new goal that I can aspire to? ☼

Afterword:

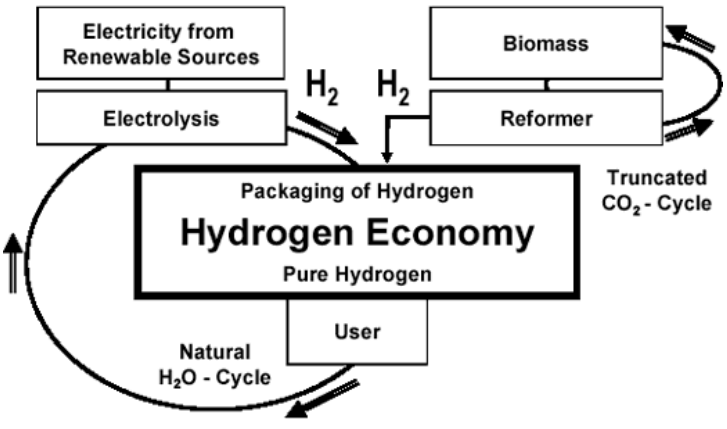
I attended many other luncheon seminars hosted by the Cato Institute and other so-called "public policy" organizations in Washington than were described in this essay. Most of these events had little or no relevance to the type of work I do, but every so often there were some, like the following one from November 2003, that piqued my interest from a professional point of view.

The Road Toward the Hydrogen Economy Has Many Twists and Turns



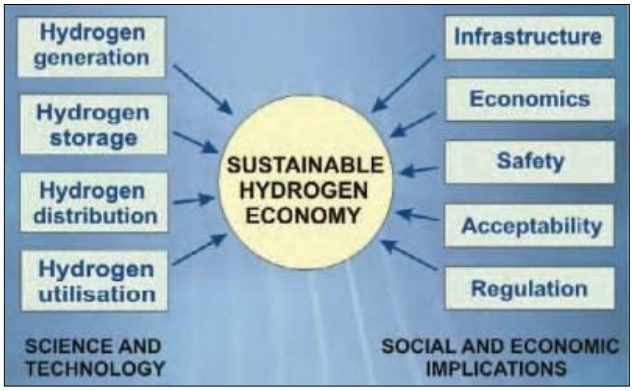
I had to be downtown today, so I took the opportunity to attend another of the Cato Institute's luncheon forums. This one was titled "A New Era for Energy?" and the speaker was an energy and environmental issues correspondent for *The Economist* who was there to promote his optimistically-titled book, *Power to the People: How the Coming Energy Revolution Will Transform an Industry, Change Our Lives, and Maybe Even Save the Planet.*

The event might well have been titled "The Great Hydrogen Hoax" though, as the talk mostly went into why the so-called hydrogen economy won't happen any time soon. Some of the reasons are obvious – technologies are not yet ready and the overall economics suck. But maybe the real reason the hydrogen economy won't happen is that the people and organizations who influence public policy don't want it to. The larger environmental groups, for instance, are deeply skeptical of the push toward hydrogen, as it threatens some of their sacred cows – renewable energy (i.e., solar and wind power), the need for improving the CAFE fuel efficiency standards for automobiles, and (since coal can be used to make hydrogen via coal gasification) limitation of greenhouse gas emissions. And the big oil and automotive companies are committing only a relatively tiny fraction of their overall resources toward hydrogen production and utilization, the implication being that they are not really serious about it and are only using it as a cover so they can keep doing business as usual.



The speaker thought that a hydrogen economy might actually stand a chance of succeeding, but before that can happen there needs to be a sea change in how the true costs of various types of fuels and energy are determined. Specifically, externalities and hidden subsidies should be taken into account. For instance, the true cost of crude oil should perhaps include the cost of keeping military forces in the Middle East to protect the oil supply, or the true cost of coal should perhaps include the remediation costs of acid rain or surface mine cleanup. The problem with that, of course, is that the result you get depends in large part on who is doing the analysis (and what agendas are being served).

That seemed true enough to me, but it also seemed that the overall big picture was being ignored. So when I got called on in the Q&A session that followed, I asked:



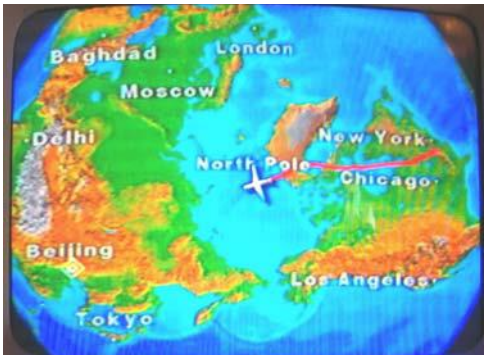
"The issues you described that affect the overall viability of a hydrogen economy actually seem like a tempest in a teapot when you look at the energy use trends in the United States. Annual consumption of crude oil, for instance, is now about 16% greater than it was in 1990, while annual demand for natural gas and coal are up about 20% since 1990 and annual consumption of electricity has increased by more than 25% since 1990. It occurs to me that the hydrogen economy doesn't really stand much of a chance as long as the demand for energy keeps increasing at the current rate. We're going to need all the energy we can find from any and all sources just to keep up."

I normally get shrugged off when I make a comment like that, but it didn't happen this time. The speaker obviously looks at the situation as "glass half-full" because he (correctly) pointed out that hydrogen is a fuel, not an energy source, and that its use would not be inconsistent with any foreseeable energy mix, if the resolve was really there to make it happen. Perhaps true, but there is a long history of false starts on many different kinds of initiatives due to lack of resolve.

At any rate, it was a fairly thought-provoking hour, even more so when the speaker threw out a stray comment near the end of the session: "The developing world doesn't care about climate change. ... China cares only about its own energy security." Now *there's* the topic that the forum should have taken on! ☼

Afterword:

At the time of this luncheon forum I had not yet been to China. My first trip was in 2007, not long after non-stops from Washington to Beijing had been become available. The airplane went directly over the North Pole and I remember that it was far more interesting to watch the progress of the flight, both from what I could see out the window and from the flight path they would occasionally show on the video screen, than all the lousy movies that were available.



Arctic Ocean sea ice

I've been back there two other times, most recently last year for a bilateral U.S-China meeting on fossil energy and a multilateral Ministerial-level meeting on carbon sequestration. One of the high-profile attendees to the latter event was U.S. Secretary of Energy Steven Chu, and his presence resulted in one of the most surreal moments of my life...

Beijing 2011

Prolog: My Fifteen Minutes Are Not *Nearly* Over

I really, *really* needed to scratch my nose. But I didn't dare.

In front of me there was a chorus of camera shutters clicking. It had been going on for several minutes and all the cameras were pointed in my direction.

Associated Press photo from the international carbon sequestration meeting

They weren't pointed *at* me, though. Seated just in front of me was Nobel Laureate and current U.S. Secretary of Energy Steven Chu alongside two very high-ranking Chinese officials. We were all at a multinational Ministerial-level meeting in Beijing about carbon sequestration and they were the stars of this show, not me. I was there as part of the organization that planned and did most of the groundwork in the months leading up to the event. Because of this, some of us were given seats directly behind the table where Chu and the Chinese Ministers were, and where I was sitting happened to put me, like a modern-day Zelig, in the background of hundreds of photos. One of them, taken by an Associated Press photographer, appeared in newspapers around the world.

Afterwards, I told the co-worker who had been seated next to me that I was probably in more photos in those ten minutes than for the previous ten years combined. I'm taking this as a sign that my Warholian fifteen minutes of fame are not *nearly* over.

The Sights and Smells of Beijing

I've been to Beijing two other times, but neither was for as long as this business trip. The multilateral carbon sequestration meeting was an all-week affair, but there was also a bilateral U.S.-China meeting that took place on the Friday of the week before that. The roll-up to the trip was a bit intense and there was a lot of scrambling, almost to the day of departure, to finish all of the preparations. But the bilateral meeting went well, with no immediate follow-up of any kind needed. And that freed up the weekend.

at the bilateral U.S.-China meeting

Beijing is an extremely bustling city so I decided to see what life was like outside our hotel. There was nothing much of interest on the very wide boulevard in front of the hotel, but the side streets had all kinds of fascinating things to see – everything from shops selling various herbal remedies, to places with laundry hanging on clotheslines, to sidewalk food vendors. In particular there were *lots* of sidewalk food vendors. For the brave of heart (and strong of stomach) you could get a spider or a scorpion, either wok-fried or alive and wriggling. There was also something that was giving off a horrendous odor that I can only imagine fried fecal matter would

smell like. I was told it was something called 'stinky tofu', which seems to be a delicacy. I later found out, to my amazement, that the *CNN Go* website rates stinky tofu as one of the world's fifty most delicious foods. But that's probably only if you're dining upwind of where it's being prepared.

A 'Suit'able Place to Shop

the Hong Qiao Pearl Market

There were plenty of street merchants as well, many of them selling knock-offs of popular American and European brand names. All the counterfeit merchandise didn't interest me, but I did want to do a bit of shopping so I went to the Hong Qiao five-story indoor mall that's better known as the "Pearl Market".

One of the floors at Hong Qiao does have shops where pearls and other types of jewelry are for sale, but most of the place is filled with kiosk stalls with merchandise of all nature. I was able to find two very nice fired clay teapots, one in the shape of a dragon and one a turtle, as well as some cloisonné holiday ornaments, and a few days later I bought a couple of very nice neckties, including a dragon-pattered one which I wore during the final day of the carbon sequestration meeting. But the 'charm' of shopping there is having the stamina to bargain with all the aggressive salesladies.


teapots from China

Let me correct myself – the salespeople (mostly young women) are not just aggressive, they are *super* aggressive. They're usually not willing to take no for an answer should you show even the slightest hint of wanting to buy something. And that's where the negotiations start. The initial asking price for the two teapots I bought was high, even by American standards. When I said that I wasn't happy and wanted to look somewhere else the price started to come down. But it was still too high, so after a couple of minutes of haggling I started to leave the stall and was blocked by one of the ladies while the other one started *rapidly* lowering the price. In the end, we settled on an amount that was no more than about 20% of the original asking price. And even at that, I'm *sure* I overpaid.


my new custom-tailored business suit

The shop of most interest to me at Hong Qiao wasn't, strictly speaking, really a shop at all. If you are in need a new business suit (as I was), there are several tailor services there that can make one quickly. The one I chose one had been recommended by one of the Saudi delegates to the carbon sequestration meeting. They came to my hotel with measuring tape and cloth samples, and the suit was ready for a preliminary fitting the very next evening. Two days later I had a custom-tailored suit that had been part of a long bolt of cloth less than a week earlier.

A 'Forbidden' Pleasure in the Middle of Beijing

There are many places to visit in Beijing beside shopping malls, and the most famous one was just a few minutes walk from the hotel – the Forbidden City. It was originally constructed in the early 1400s as the home of Chinese emperors and their families, and for centuries it was the political center of the country.

entrance to the Forbidden City at dusk

The place is huge – there are almost a thousand buildings in an area of about 170 acres, all completely enclosed by towering walls. It's now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is perhaps the world's largest museum. Many if not most of the buildings host collections of clothing, weapons, tools, and other artifacts, some dating back to the Ming Dynasty. And the buildings themselves are pretty amazing, most more than 500 years old. I later read that the Forbidden City is the most extensive collection of conserved ancient wooden structures in the world.

amongst the thousands of people inside the Forbidden City

I visited the place along with two others who were over for the meetings. And also about 40,000 other tourists, mostly from other parts of China. It's the #1 tourist attraction in all of China. The Forbidden City is too large to see in any reasonable amount of time, and to see it properly you need a guide. We had neither. In retrospect it's probably just as well, because after a couple of hours (for me at least) sensory overload starts to set in. The buildings you discover are truly remarkable, but do not seem that much different from the ones you've already seen.

There's only one structure near Beijing that does not cause sensory overload, no matter how many times you see it or however long you've been there.

It's the Wall.

A 'Great' Place to Visit

It takes a bit of effort to reach the Great Wall of China. It's about an hour's drive north of Beijing, and that's on good traffic days. I and four compatriots who were in China for the meetings took advantage of the free weekend and hired a car with driver through the hotel. That's the right way to do it, otherwise you end up on a tour bus that will take you to other places besides the wall, including the obligatory stop at an upscale retail area where you're encouraged to buy jade and cloisonné jewelry, and you end up with less than two hours at the Wall itself.

walking the Wall

There are seven different segments of the Wall near Beijing that are open to visitors, and the one we chose was at Mutianyu. It's not the closest part of the Wall to Beijing, but there *are* fewer tourists and the area around the wall is mostly forested mountain ridges.

the Wall at Mutianyu

I'd been to the Wall once previously, back in 2007, but it was to a different section that was very steep. There are also steep places at Mutianyu, but most of the Wall's topology there is a gentle incline that doesn't wear you out.

We spent nearly four hours on the Wall that day and the time flew by. The intention was to climb up to the watchtower at the top of a ridge, but there were so many places that begged you to stop and enjoy the view that we never did get there. Three of my compatriots gave up early but I made it into the steepest section, a few hundred feet below the ridge top. I sat down to catch my breath, and asked a younger and stronger guy coming back down if the view from up there was better than from where I was sitting.

"Not really," he said. "All the views are great."

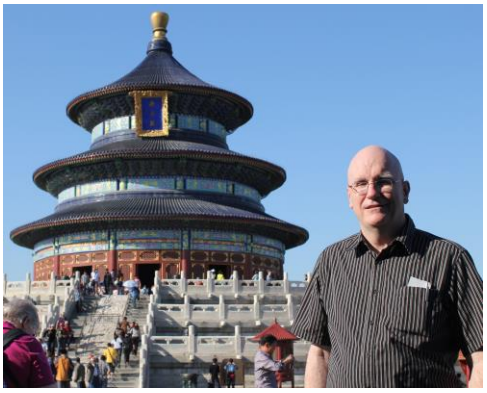
And with that, I decided to head back down to meet up with the others instead of trying to own the top of the climb. "Today," I told myself, "my jurisdiction ends here."

Some Very Fine Ale and Other Icons of Chinese Culture

There's a lot to discover in and around Beijing, and not just the obvious stuff like the Great Wall. For instance, we learned that the microbrewery revolution had reached China. At a restaurant not far from the Wall we enjoyed a very fine Pale Ale from the Great Leap Brewing Company that might just be the best beer in all of Asia.

Great Leap Pale Ale

The father of the 'Great Leap Forward', Chairman Mao himself, is also there in Beijing waiting to be discovered by true believers and curiosity seekers. His tomb is in Tiananmen Square, right across the boulevard from the Forbidden City, and I was told by someone who went in there that the body of Mao has been preserved and is on display.



at the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests in the Temple of Heaven complex

I decided I didn't need any visual confirmation of that, but I *did* want to see two other icons of Chinese culture that were located in Beijing. One was the Temple of Heaven, located just a short distance from the Hong Qiao Pearl Market. Unlike the Forbidden City which had almost no green areas, the Temple of Heaven was filled with spacious tree-filled parks. It's also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, built about the same time as the Forbidden City, where Emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties came for ceremonies of prayer for good harvests. I and one of my friends from the meeting were able to visit it for just a single hour on an afternoon when our involvement wasn't needed in the sequestration meeting. We couldn't take in very much, so we spent most of that time at the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, a magnificent wooden structure that is, alas, the reconstruction of the building that burned down in the late 1800s after being struck by lightning.

Even more splendid is the Summer Palace complex in the northwestern part of the city. I was able to visit the place for a couple of hours on the morning of the day I left Beijing to go home, and it's certainly worth a lot more time than that. It's yet another entry in the UNESCO World Heritage List, having served (as its name implies) as a summer retreat for Chinese emperors and their families. The place is filled with hilly winding paths and magnificent pavilions, and there was way too much for me to see in the time I had available. The signature image I came away with from my short visit was the spectacular Temple of Buddhist Virtue, but there may be other buildings there that are even *more* wonderful than that!

the Temple of Buddhist Virtue at the Summer Palace

Next time I come back I'll make sure to find them.

Epilog: Bubba Was Here!

The Mutianyu section of the Great Wall is different from other segments because it's high on a ridge that you can reach only via cableway. There have been, no doubt, many famous people who have visited this section of the Wall, but only one of them has had his visit memorialized on one of the cable cars.

It was Bubba Clinton, who back in 1998 rode in car no. 26. As did I on the short ride down to the parking area. History is all around you, all you have to do is find it.

riding in Bubba's car

The flight back to the United States was a much, much longer ride, and I sat next to a technical consultant of some kind who was coming back to the States after a week out in the middle of China. Actually, it was just a stopover, as once he reached Dulles Airport he immediately had to catch a connector flight that would take him down to Brazil. We started comparing notes on places we'd been, and where we'd still like to go. Turned out we didn't have too many in common, but there was one destination we both agreed was our favorite place to go. Home.

It was a good trip. ☼