Who changed the rules?

Peter Schwartzman

Spending my adolescence just miles from the White House gave me a great occasion to consider the ‘truth’ given down by our government. Fortunately, I had teachers and mentors that suggested that I should not accept these ‘rules’ without considerable deliberation. In the end, I came to the conclusion that the ‘facts’ and come to my own conclusions. I continue to follow this advice (and hence this column).

But some 20 years since my Washington, D.C. immersion, I feel like the ‘rules’ have changed and yet so few realize this. It seems so hypocritical to change the ‘rules’ midstream, and it appears that those in power don’t think we’ll notice. I’ve noticed and so have many others. Let me mention just a few of the U.S. actions:

In the 1980s, it was repeatedly taught that we the U.S.S.R.’s invasion of Afghanistan was immoral and repugnant. It was supposedly a sign of a superpower forcing its will upon a helpless country—presumably to spread communism and to have rule that is stable and well governed. The U.S. response, the U.S. government felt just supported supporting factionalism that wanted to remove the Soviet occupiers. (Ironically, it was this resistance that catapulted Osama bin Laden, born in Saudi Arabia to one of the leading Saudi families, to hero status within certain factions.) The Soviets ended up spending nearly ten years in Afghanistan ‘trying to win.’ The death toll during this ten-year ‘war’ was immeasurable—alone one million dead belong to certain groups (of whom were Afghan) and several million were wounded. In the end, the Soviets left Afghanistan and left one left in brutal Civil War.

Now, just over 20 years since the Soviet debacle, the U.S. seems poised to follow in the same footsteps. Well, actually, we already have. In the last two years, the U.S. has invaded countries where it is not and has lost its £20 billion in aid to a billion in aid to the Taliban. (One suggestion is that the U.S. has lost its $20 billion in aid to the Taliban.)

The U.S. government, however, is not alone in this role. The U.S. government, however, is not alone in the role. The U.S. government, however, is not alone in the role. The U.S. government, however, is not alone in the role.

The Old Scout

Victims of class warfare

Garrison Keillor

As a member of the board of directors of the American International Group, I am pained by the hardship that the Best of the Best letter carrying on our company’s the $450 million in bonuses we are paying out to the traders in credit derivatives after the billions from the U.S. Treasury to rescue us from going over the cliff that the derivative traders were driving us toward.

In Greece when the storm hit and got a call from Marie, my assistant, saying, ‘We’re sending the jet,’ and came home to find a stack of anonymous letters in the mailbox, saying, ‘Bonuses’ To the others who totaled a corporation? Where did this idea of rewarding failure come from? Are you in living in a society where it is generated by following owls into underground caverns?’

Many of these missed votes were written with the help of trip pens in big black letters and words snipped out of magazines, words such as ‘fraud’ and ‘skunks,’ ‘San Quentin,’ ‘die in hell’ and ‘eat glass sharp,’ and a picture of a naked man chained to a rock and a bird pecking out his liver.

To cancel bonuses because of a bad year is like refunding the greens just because a golfer has hit into the rough. It would be counterproductive.

And in the end, AIG is not about credit default swaps or derivatives. It is about people.

People like Megan, who suffered a painful illness after her debit card swap dropped an $234.15 and whose mission is to save the endangered gnomeweed. That’s the gnomeweed habitat in Vermont.

I wish that the politicians lining up to dip cherry bombs in our toilets could meet the AIG family, including its wonderful board of directors: Peter Lorre, Louie Louie, Larry King, the Duke of Earl, Erle Stanley Gardner, Ralph Stanely, Mortimer Stanley, Stan and Ollie, Alley Oop, Rupert Murdoch, Dr. John Roberts, Judge Judy, Rudy Giuliani, Sweet Leilani, Sleeping Beauty, Buddy Guy, Sy Novak, Rufus Wainwright, Wayne Newton, Newt Gingrich, Richard Corry, Lorrie Moore, and did I mention Peter Lorre? He’s there too.

Their friendship is all the reward I need for my service, as my service was to receive a bonus myself for having a perfect record of attendance for three years running.

Last weekend, we held an emergency meeting in Antigua at one of those resorts where men who can walk around freely and not be accompanied by armed stockholders for their lawyers. We agreed that the first priority is to re-establish confidence. These are difficult times and we will have to work our way through them and reach the other side. Reincarnation will get us nowhere.

It’s just like sailing a yacht. If your crew neglects to secure the lanyard and the yardarm swings loose and knocks the martins off your tray and spills a thousand dollars worth of beluga caviar on the deck, do you curse the silly baggers and perhaps distract them so that the Windermere lands on the reef and is reduced to splinters in waters populated by hammerhead sharks?

No, and neither do we at AIG.

It’s easy to look back and say that things have been done, but that is not the focus of our style. I have never heard an iota of acrimony in a board meeting. The level of civility has never wavered. My bonus was approved unanimously, and when I announced my resignation, people came around to give me hugs. They cried, ‘If you’re leaving, then we’ll leave too,’ and so they will, and as Monday will be replaced by Dick Cheney, Lib, Wayne, Jane Smiley, Miley Cyrus, Don Imus, Iris Murdoch, Dr. Phil, Lill Kim, Homer Simpson, Lil Simon, Simon Cowell, Carl Kasell, Russell Banks, Ben Bernanke, Frankle Avalon, Lon Chaney, and did I mention Dick Cheney? He’s there too.

If you have any idea what style is, it’s time to move on. And so I am leaving for Costa Rica and a settlement on its Pacific shore where one can enjoy the ocean breeze far away from discord and bickering. It is a new residential development called Tierra de Gracias and homestead sales are limited to persons who are profoundly thankful.

(Garrison Keillor is the author of a new Lake Wobegon novel, "Liberty (Viking)."

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