

Cranes, Jets and Drones – Reflections on Flight

By John Heid

First there are cries. An ethereal melodic bellowing, both clamorous and resonant. Then the seamless blue sky becomes speckled with gray dust motes moving from the edge of sight. The calls grow louder, nearer. Where is the point that thin air materializes into beings? Then like confetti on Broadway, cranes descend. Seven foot wings askew. Legs dangling wildly. Gray leaves to earth. Enmasse. Wave upon wave. Thousands of them. The skies of eastern Arizona are acutely alive this time of year.

In “Living On The Wind” Scott Weidensaul says, “Bird migration is the only true unifying natural phenomenon in the world... one of the most riveting and miraculous phenomena of the planet.”

Most days in Tucson begin soft blue. Rim to rim sky. Then, just after the sun crests the Rincon Mountains east of the city, the rumble begins, like some distant industrial blow torch revving up. The wave rolls across the city. The F-16s are up and roaring. Two by two they dissect the dawn colors. No poetry here. It’s all metal and howl. The Tucson morning regimen. Like grinding your coffee or operating the trash disposal.

Some call the tumult our daily “sound of freedom.”

Now, change is in the air. A new “generation” of fighter jet is coming off the assembly line, the F-35 Lightning II. It’s 75 percent louder than the F-16 according to its manufacturer, Lockheed Martin. Local debate has erupted. Advocates of the sound of freedom and the not-in-my-backyard proponents are shadowboxing on the editorial page of our local newspaper. Pro and con. Back and forth. The melodrama unfolds each morning as I read the commentaries over coffee,

Mr. Obama, Say It Isn’t So

President Obama has recently added loan guarantees to finance the building of two new nuclear reactors to his long list of disappointing policy moves. This, along with espousing war to the Nobel Peace Committee and his troop surge in Afghanistan, has taken the shine off Mr. Obama’s campaign theme of hope and change. It appears to be business as usual in Washington.

The announcement of the \$8.3 billion loan guarantee to help the Southern Company, a privately held energy producer based in Burke County Georgia, was wrapped up in the rhetoric of job creation and clean energy. It was also a reach across the aisle to Republican law makers, whom he courted thusly, “Those who have long advocated for nuclear power — including many Republicans — have to recognize that we will not achieve a big boost in nuclear capacity unless we also create a system of incentives to make clean energy profitable.” This is the sort of nuclear doublespeak that we have come to expect from the industry, not a president voted into office pledging to help the U.S. become “the world’s leading exporter of clean energy.”

As if the \$8.3 billion were not enough, President Obama has intimated that he would like to triple the loan guarantee program for new reactors in the 2011 budget to \$54 billion. So not only are taxpayers guaranteeing loans for an industry with a well documented history of cost overruns and suspect safety records, we are also providing the actual loans through the Federal Financing Bank — a little-known government corporation overseen by the U.S. Treasury Department that more typically makes loans to universities, rural electric co-ops and other small-scale projects.

Fortunately this is not a done deal. The Southern Company has yet to agree to the terms of the loan and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has dismissed the experimental Westinghouse reactor design for “deep safety” reasons. There is still time to stop lawmakers from approving such a reckless use of our money and to send a loud and clear message to President Obama to take a closer look at the prospect of building more nuclear reactors and the inherent danger in such folly. — PV

under the F-16s. Nary a query about the need for fighter jets at all. War itself never gets an airing, let alone peace and quiet.

In “The Trouble with Our State,” poet Daniel Berrigan said:

“There is no war like the plague of media / There is no war like / routine / There is no war like / 3 square meals / There is no war like / a prevailing wind / it blows softly, / whispers / DON’T ROCK THE BOAT! / The sails obey, the / ship of state rolls on.”

Now enter the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, known as drones. They are the premier weapon *du jour* and the emerging icon of U.S. military prowess. Drones create a “cleaner, safer battlefield” the promotions read. There is no mention of who’s cleaner and safer and who’s not. Drones are nearly silent, relatively inexpensive compared to fighter jets and highly effective at “successfully engaging the target” — without endangering the flight team who are often half a world away.

Former New York Representative Jim Walsh has said, “They (remote operators) can literally be fighting a war in Iraq and at the end of their shift be playing with their kids in Camillus,” New York.

One of these half-way-around-the-world units is the Tucson-based Arizona Air National Guard’s 214th Reconnaissance Group which last year earned the Air Force’s outstanding unit award. The 214th boasts of firing 47 missiles from its Predator drones “to protect U.S. service members.” Tucson to Kabul: 7,833 miles.

For over two million years, cranes have migrated across the earth’s hemispheres. Far below them, bloody wars raged and national borders were reconfigured. Today, 11 of the 15 species of these “birds of heaven” are threatened or endangered, an exception being the North American sandhill crane. Across ancient cultures to the present day they are a profound living symbol of longevity and fidelity. What do these Pleistocene epoch beings know that we homo sapiens do not? What can we learn from them about well-being, let alone survival?

Among many of Dr. King’s ageless truths, he has an answer: “The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.” — **John Heid helped found and lives at Rose of the Desert Catholic Worker in Tucson.**

Howard Zinn

1922-2010

One lesson the great history professor Howard Zinn, who died in January, always gave his students is that the greatest crimes of the past were crimes of *obedience* not disobedience. Zinn was a man of his word and practiced nonviolent



resistance to all forms of war and human exploitation. In 1982, when a group of anti-war activists sat down and refused to leave the White House lawn demanding an end to President Reagan’s support of the junta in El Salvador, I was awed to see Howard, at age 60, among those arrested and dragged to the DC lockup. The crowded holding tank became Howard’s temporary classroom and he began an encouraging — and as always hilariously engaging — lecture on Emma Goldman, about whom he had just finished his stage play *Emma*.

We’d all do well to read or reread his books. *Howard Zinn on War, Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal, Declarations of Independence, Failure to Quit, and A People’s History of the United States* would make a good start. We can honor Zinn respectfully by following his example. A jail sentence for some well-placed disobedience could perhaps provide the most appropriate chance to study the exciting and devastating histories that the professor labored so generously to leave with us. — JL