

CALL ME
B

*A HOPEFUL VIEW
OF HISTORY AND REVOLUTION*

BY
BILL BRYANT

WILLIAMSBURG
VIRGINIA

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“As we would have our descendants judge us, so we ought to judge our fathers. In order to form a correct estimate of their merits, we ought to place ourselves in their situation, to put out of our minds, for a time, all that knowledge which they could not have and we could not help having . . . It is too much that the benefactors of mankind, after having been reviled by the dunces of their generation for going too far, should be reviled by the dunces of the next generation for not going far enough.”

Thomas B. Macauley

On the cover: In this 2007 photograph by the Richmond Times-Dispatch, the ship Godspeed sails up the James River with Richmond in the distance.

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THANKS AND DISCLAIMERS

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Some Disclaimers

- I have not written this book as an employee of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, but as a private

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citizen who happens to work there part-time.

Accordingly, the sentiments and opinions I express are my own and should not be viewed as reflecting the policy of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation or any of its employees, volunteers or donors, although I naturally entertain the hope that most if not all of my colleagues share many if not all of my sentiments and opinions, or at least respect them.

- I disclaim being perfect, and accept responsibility for any errors of fact or limitations of understanding found in this book, and would appreciate being corrected.
- This is not a kiss-and-tell book. It is, however, a hug-and-tell book. Be prepared.
- This is not exactly a book about history, or about teaching and learning methodologies, or educational theory and practice, or museum operations, or politics or revolution or the future. It's about all of these things, and more, because it's a book about people.
- I am not as vain and egotistical as some parts of this book might make you believe I must be. In deciding what to put in and what to leave out, I have been guided by the compelling purpose of the book – to teach, from lessons I have learned through personal experience as well as academic study – even if, to make a point effectively, I must shed modesty. Some of my friends, through the years, have

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criticized me for not being more ego-asserting and self-promotional. This book will please them, even as it makes me uncomfortable.

A Thought for Today

The American war is over, but this is
far from the case with the American Revolution.
On the contrary, nothing but the first act
of the great drama is closed.

Benjamin Rush

Signer of the Declaration of Independence

*The struggle of today is not altogether for today.
It is for a vast future, also.*
Abraham Lincoln

CHAPTER 1: PRELUDE

AN INCIDENT

To explain why at the age of 72 I felt compelled to begin writing this book, I must refer to the manner of my early education in history, and to a specific moment in my youth.

I became addicted to the study of history – past and present and future – soon after I learned to read. In this, I was aided and abetted by my history-loving uncle Gordon Mason, who introduced me to the wonders of musty antique stores and their dusty old books – Gibbon, Mommsen, Keightley, Rollins and scores of other mostly 19th century tellers of the human story, with their richness of detail and distinctive interpretations and complex writing styles. Biographies and plans of battle and courses of empire fascinated me. My earliest “hero” was Hannibal, whom I admire not just for his military genius, but even more for his leadership, fully sharing the hardships and dangers of his men.

With similar enthusiasm, I read books about more recent history and learned early to scan the daily newspapers and the weekly news magazines. I started becoming acquainted with World War II soon after it happened, and I acutely studied the Korean War, which

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raged while my father was stationed with the Navy at Norfolk and then on Long Island.

If in this zeal for history I was unconventional, and a bit more serious-minded than other children, I certainly shared with them one characteristic: I wondered about the future.

In April of 1953, I was 12, beginning the walk home from Freeport Junior High, when I was impacted by two thoughts almost simultaneously – Thought 1: *Humanity is heading toward a great systemic crisis someday*. Thought 2: *If I prepare myself, I could be of service when that day comes*.

It happened in a couple of seconds. And from that day to this, the course of my life has been governed by the dictates of that moment.

* * *

This is not an autobiography. Suffice it to say that during the years since then I have been preoccupied with learning more about the distant and recent past, observing current events, studying new subjects, trying to keep track of advances in science and technology, obtaining and sharing useful skills and knowledge, helping to organize people to deal with community tasks, trying to be of public service – always with an eye to the future. Sometimes, this preoccupation has caused me to neglect family and friends, which I deeply regret.

Throughout the intervening years, the purpose of my life has remained constant while the path of my life has been diverted and redirected many times by a wide variety of circumstances, two early examples of which suggest

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how easily a different path might have distracted me from the purpose:

- As a freshman at Woodrow Wilson High in Portsmouth, Virginia, I eagerly anticipated being in an actual ancient history class. Within a week, it became apparent that I knew more about the subject than the teacher, who for the rest of the year allowed me to sit in the back of the room reading the morning newspaper, interrupting me only when there was a question she could not answer. She and the principal wrote a letter to the producers of “The \$64,000 Question” recommending me as a contestant. Thank God, there was no reply . . . Thus undistracted as a sophomore, being very shy but knowing that to prepare myself I must learn how to speak well, I joined the debate team. As a junior, knowing I must learn how to write well, I joined the newspaper staff.
- As a senior at Wilson, I told the track coach I wanted to quit the debate team and run the mile. He, being the last state debate champion in the school’s history, refused to let me join the track team, declaring: “Your job in life is to **think**, not run.” That spring, instead of running a mediocre mile, I (also the school newspaper editor) together with my partner Deliaan Angel (also the school yearbook editor) won the state affirmative debate championship. Thanks, Coach, and Deliaan.

Into the 1960s and during the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s, I stayed on the sometimes bewildering path set in

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the springtime of '53 . . . always wondering about the future, studying it.

* * *

In February of 1999, I was sitting in my chair, reading the newspaper, minding my own business, when my wife Dot stuck in front of my face a freshly clipped classified ad and announced simply: “We need more money.”

One glance at the ad – something about a “museum program assistant” at Jamestown Settlement – made me unhappy, but I said nothing and merely nodded, because she was right.

I objected to the idea because it would (1) distract me from my focus on my book about Nat Turner, (2) require me to enter a whole new working environment peopled by strangers, and (3) engage me in activity not directly related to public service at (4) a place about which I knew little and much of the little I knew, admittedly from its earlier years, was unfavorable. All of which was heavily outweighed by (5): “We need more money.”

I could not have been more wrong in my objections and expectations. Today, on my resumé, my time with the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation is regarded as “Public Service” – and I happen to consider it one of my best contributions to the future, as well as a blessing to myself.

Among my reasons for feeling so fortunate:

- Not only did my book about Nat Turner proceed to publication as **Tomorrow Jerusalem**, but also my book of poetry **the 30th of may: a poem of the revolution** was published, thanks to Phil Merrick,

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whom I met and befriended at Jamestown Settlement.

- The whole new working environment proved to be exciting, peopled by strangers who soon became like family, linked by a common love. Contact with people – colleagues and visitors alike – has been a kaleidoscopically changing yet continually pleasant experience.
- I have indeed been directly engaged in important public service.
- I have enjoyed it!!!
- I now know intimately Jamestown Settlement and the Yorktown Victory Center, and am proud to be serving at such first-class teaching institutions.
- I now know and understand fairly well the whole story and meaning of early Jamestown and the whole story and meaning of Yorktown, which I honestly did not know or understand anywhere near well enough in 1999, when I had to begin teaching and explaining the stories to other people.
- Having been a longtime close but outside observer of the tourism business in the Historic Triangle, suddenly I was in the belly of the beast, where for almost 15 years I have been learning not only about museum operations and the inner dynamics of the tourism business, but also about the sorts of people who visit this region, and why. (One thing I've

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learned to my dismay, as to the dismay of others, is that too many visitors, especially young people, have been leaving this area talking more about their “ghost tour” experiences in the restored area than about the living human **meaning** of our historic sites.)

- Being a revolutionist requires one to try to be very close to the whole people, a form of “research” which with my limited resources was for many years very difficult. This changed dramatically in 1999, when, instead of me searching for ways to learn how folks are really feeling out there in America and the world, the folks – the democracy – began coming to me! By the tens of thousands, from virtually every walk of life, from every state in the Union and scores of other nations, people from all along the spectrum of political and religious and economic and social experience have crossed my path since 1999, and many of them have shared their thoughts and feelings with me. I may be forgiven my honest belief that I understand the mood of the American people perhaps as well as anyone.
- I am smarter. I am wiser. I am a better person.
- I have helped to pay some bills.
- I have been enabled to write this book, which is supposedly about my experiences as a museum tour guide, but is really about what more than six

decades of studying history with a purpose have taught me.

A CERTAIN BIAS

Whenever we express an opinion, we indicate a bias of some sort. Since the word “certain” means not only particular but also definite, and since I have a lot of opinions, I must acknowledge a certain fundamental bias in my point of view; numerous fundamental biases, actually, among them:

- Trained and experienced as an old-school journalist and competitive debater, I am biased toward objectivity, reasoning, analysis and fairness in my decision-making and judgment. (In debate, I much preferred the affirmative side – defining the terms, stating the compelling need for a major change in the current system to solve a major problem, and offering a workable plan to get the job done.)
- I am biased constantly toward the moderate center, preferably toward discussion rather than debate, always toward civility rather than hostility, cooperation rather than confrontation.
- I profess the bias of being an idealist **and** a realist, and am at ease being both. As long as my feet are on the ground, I am free to reach and dream as high as I want and wish and can, and free to encourage others to do so.

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- I am biased toward the ideals of the American Revolution, the egalitarian sentiments of the Declaration of Independence and the promises of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.
- I am a native son of Virginia, invested with the legacy of many generations of hard-working people, mostly of the yeoman class. In my manner, in my regard for history and in my attitude toward public service, I have always considered myself a Virginian. It is a state of mind, a sense of self and place and duty I have felt for as long as I can remember, re-enforced as I became familiar with the likes of Washington, Henry, Jefferson, Randolph, Wythe, Mason, Madison, Monroe, Marshall, Wilson and their ilk – and, I must add, influenced in more recent years by the spirit of the more native people of Virginia.
- I am certainly an optimist. History has taught me to be an optimist. I have no choice in the matter. I think things are going to turn out all right in the end. If there was ever any doubt in my mind, it was resolved in 1974 when (1) I perceived a fundamental promising shift in the course of human events, and (2) I attended a local lecture by a Princeton University physicist trying to arouse grassroots interest in a whole new way of looking at the future of human activity in space – a radical, logical alternative to the idea of merely bouncing clumsily around on the Moon

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- I am most definitely biased toward the people, the whole people, to whom I feel a loyalty demanding absolute nonpartisanship and sometimes bordering on fanaticism. I make no apologies for this bias, or this devotion, although I probably should express regrets if I have disappointed some people or inadvertently stepped on some toes in the process of being so stubbornly nonpartisan.

CHALLENGING AXIOMS

Upon meeting Einstein, the great journalist Lincoln Steffens (whose autobiography is one of the best books I've ever read) asked: "How did you do it?"

Einstein answered: "By challenging an axiom."

I challenge four, beginning with:

Axiom 1

**Humanity is heading toward
some sort of cataclysmic disaster
in the relatively near future.**

Says who?

Hollywood! The popular media! The video game industry! Disaster sells, and if in the process of being profitable it darkens the mood and obscures the vision of the people, well, that's the price we pay for democracy and the free market, et cetera.

In fact, according to my research, humanity faces no immediate problems we cannot solve, if we cooperate, if common sense and common interest prevail. It all depends on the people, and I have faith in the people.

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Likewise in fact, there are many less violent, more promising scenarios for the near-term and long-term future of humanity – great material, someday, for the game-makers, the film-makers, the image-makers. To make the future interesting and appealing, Klingons and killer asteroids are not required. Neither is:

Axiom 2

**The need to make war
is inherent in human nature;
therefore, there will always be wars.**

If this was ever true, and I doubt it, I am convinced it is no longer so. The improving conduct of nations, the inexorable surge of democracy, the greater maturity of humanity and the integrating effects of information technology and economics combine to put the abolition of war between nations, and of most others forms of war, within the reach of humanity well before the end of this century, and perhaps much sooner. We may dare to imagine it. It's what almost all of the people want.

The basic impulse of humanity is to create, not destroy. Peace is not a pause between wars; war is an interruption of peace. The fundamental path of the people through the ages has been forward and upward, not backward and downward. And when I think of the struggle of those people, to help us get to where we are today and might be tomorrow, it strengthens my resolve and as well as my confidence in the ability of the people.

Achieving peace will involve an end to:

Axiom 3

**The resources of Earth are finite,
increasing competition for diminishing resources,
enhancing the prospect of war.**

This mindset became global at the governmental level in the early 1970s due to publication of **The Limits of Growth**, and remains a widespread way of thinking even though its premises were shattered decades ago.

The resources of Earth are indeed finite. However, the resources available in space – including all of the raw materials found on Earth plus endless energy – are virtually infinite. And we already have, or soon can have, the technological ability to begin using these resources to the great advantage of the whole of humanity.

As that Princeton physicist and I wrote in 1980, for the First Global Conference on the Future: “We should be moving from an economics of scarcity to an economics of plenty, from competition for decreasing resources to cooperation for increasing resources. The challenge is to create a new capability for incorporating this dramatic new reality . . . In the final analysis, ours is the historic responsibility of unlocking the door to an open future for humanity.”

The *real* breakout into space – like the proper response to most problems confronting humanity – is a global responsibility, a global task. The ability of the United States to assume a proper, necessary and appropriate role in this adventure will depend on how we deal with:

Axiom 4

**The apathy of the American people
contributes to the continuation
of the crisis in governance.**

The people are **not** apathetic. They care, a lot. But they feel helpless, uncomfortably divided, misled – respectful of our revolutionary ideals and constitutional form of government but unable to see **how** to change our obviously failing but entrenched system of electing those who administer the government.

There's a huge difference between apathy and helplessness. There is no cure for the former; for the latter, there is the continuing American Revolution, which I shall discuss later.

In the meantime, I refer to something Abraham Lincoln said in a different context but with a message directly relevant to today: "Revolutionize through the ballot-box, and restore the government once more to the affection and hearts of men, by making it express, as it was intended to do, the highest spirit of justice and liberty."

The JOB

I am an MPA – a museum program assistant, a tour guide, a teacher – at Jamestown Settlement and the Yorktown Victory Center, administered by the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, an agency of the Department of Education of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Thus, I am an employee of the people.

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As of the 8th of December and my final tour in 2013, I have taught 2,030 groups at Jamestown and 359 at Yorktown.

Thus, I am a veteran – although it must be noted that in unwritten policy any MPA who survives one busy season is officially a veteran.

* * *

Before I came to work at Jamestown Settlement, I had never set foot inside the museum. The closest I got was the great lawn, where in 1984, as part of the 350th anniversary of James City County, I helped to produce a children's play ("The Dreams of Today") I had written.

I don't remember much about the beginning of my formal (indoor and outdoor) training to be an MPA, except that the weather was unkindly cold and the training itself was considerably more comprehensive, detailed and competent than I expected, though I must note that I really didn't know what to expect.

I emphasize: That was only the beginning of the training, which has been constant – at team meetings, general staff meetings, Training Academy courses ranging from terrorism awareness to archaeology, roundtable discussions, lecture series – plus the regular State of the Foundation briefings by executive director Phil Emerson (actually six presentations at times and places enabling almost all personnel to be updated and on the same page regarding a wide range of subjects). When I started training, I had no conception it would be like this.

Early on, personally and professionally, I felt comfortable among the people with whom I was working, particularly the veteran MPAs and the veteran costumed

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interpreters. It was obvious that they *wanted* to be there, *enjoyed* doing their jobs and *respected* one another, which, needless to say, makes for a good workplace. On a human level, the outlook was promising.

* * *

I remember only one thing about my first tour at the Settlement. I remember it distinctly because I have repeated it in one version or another on every tour I have given since, whatever the group's composition.

That first time, it happened to be an elementary school group.

"My name is Bill Bryant," I said, then impulsively added: "But if you have any questions for me today, please call me B. Let me hear it!"

"B!" the kids enthusiastically replied.

"Oh, that sounded good. Let me hear it again!!"

"B!!"

"Yes! One more time!!!"

"B!!!"

"Thank you . . . I have four grandchildren, who have always called me B. So if you call me B, who will I think of?"

"Your grandchildren."

"Will that make me happy?"

"Yes."

"And do you want a happy teacher?"

"Yes."

"Then what's my name?!"

"B!!!"

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* * *

At a recent staff meeting, a new MPA commented that she kept asking herself: What am I doing here?

Amid mild laughter, I and other veterans exchanged glances and knowing nods. We are *still* asking ourselves that question!

I do hope this book helps to answer it.

THE INTRODUCTION

First, you got to get their attention; then, you got to keep it. This is simpler with groups of adults, who know how to learn and to enjoy, than it is with groups of students, who are easily distracted and often need to be convinced that something is actually worth learning *and* can be enjoyed.

As soon as I begin to get together with a school group, while we're getting our first impressions of each other, I seek to establish bonds with them, for my sake as well as theirs.

Sometimes, my first words are stern instructions: "Okay, I have two rules. Here they come. Are you ready?" Some say yes; a few say yes, sir. "Don't call me sir. I'm a working man. I said are you ready?" Yes! "Are you ready?" Yes!!! "Rule number one: When I walk, you follow. If you get ahead of me, I will stop on a dime. You got that?" Yes! "Rule number two: When I stop to talk, you come close. I *have* stopped." They come closer.

Sometimes, seeing a girl smiling, I sourly ask: "Why are you smiling? History isn't fun!" She and/or some classmates say yes, it is! "Okay," I immediately agree, smiling, changing my mind and my manner entirely.

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“In fact, history is the most fun subject there is. Do you know why? What’s history all about? Us. And is there anything more exciting and interesting than us?” End of discussion.

Sometimes, we simply begin with the “B” routine.

* * *

At the beginning of (and throughout) all tours, I make emphatic the importance of the history we’re talking about. Depending on the time available and the group’s level of knowledge and understanding, this emphasis is expressed in various ways; but it is always there.

Consider:

- This is **not** Virginia history. This is **not** American history. This is **world** history, because what happened here – at Jamestown and at Williamsburg and at Yorktown – changed the whole world fundamentally, forever, and explains the world in which we live today.
- If we go back 400 years, to the time of early Jamestown, the *whole* world was ruled by a handful of powerful men mostly – kings, emperors, tsars, shahs, shoguns, whatever – and what did **we** count for? Let me hear you say: Zilch! Nada! Diddleysquat! And I’m being perfectly serious. The world was ruled by ignorance, poverty, oppression and a handful of powerful men, and we counted for nothing. That’s the way it *was*, and it all began to change at Jamestown.