

Noah, Nixon and JFK

by Paul McKellips

In the biblical flood story, Noah needed only 120 years to build a boat measuring 450 feet long (one-and-a-half football fields), 75 feet wide and three stories tall. Noah then declared the imminent arrival of a flood, the proportions of which had never been seen. His noble gesture to save the animals might not have been as widely criticized (or as highly doubted) had he built his floater a bit closer to the sea.

In 1962, John Kennedy pulled a “Noah” of his own at Rice University when he gave the nation less than eight years to build a “giant rocket” 300 feet tall (one football field), to be made of “new metal alloys, some of which have not yet been invented” that would take a man to the moon (240,000 miles away) and bring him back safely at more than 25,000 miles per hour through the earth’s atmosphere. His noble goal might not have been as widely criticized (or doubted) had he not declared the cost of such a mission to be less than the country was spending on cigarettes and cigars each year.

On December 23, 1971, Richard Nixon signed the National Cancer Act and, without setting dates or expectations, assured the country that “the Congress is totally committed, to provide the funds that are necessary—whatever is necessary—for the conquest of cancer.” His noble declaration might not have been as widely criticized (or doubted) had he not meant our Congress.

Regardless of the man or the mission, a cottage industry of naysayers and nattering nabobs always pops up. From Noah’s construction site near Baghdad to Kennedy’s Cape Canaveral and even Nixon’s Christmas signing at the White House, the world has never had a shortage of critics to say, “You’re wrong.”

They say, “You crazy old fool...we’ve never even seen a flood.”

They say, “What a stupid idea. Slow down, we just barely got John Glenn out of orbit.”

And still others mock the great scientists today who can’t solve the common cold yet think they’re going to wage war on cancer with an army of mice, zebrafish and fruit flies.

To the extent that science can ethically use all means possible to prevent, treat and cure human and animal disease, shouldn’t we reach for it?

Say what you will about Noah, but his mission focus was legendary, if not biblical. Kennedy justified a moon shot “not because it is easy, but because it is hard.” And Nixon started the war on cancer with no battle speech or soaring rhetoric, but rather a simple statement: “We would not want to raise false hopes by simply the signing of an Act...but for those who have cancer, they can at least have the assurance that everything that can be done... now will be done.”

What kind of leadership and marching orders could the world’s 450,000 men and women working in biomedical research use today? Perhaps all three.

Some will work with the silent resilience of Noah preparing for the flood of infectious diseases and bio-weapons that may never come.

Some will conduct research on the dreadful diseases of the final frontier—the brain—in an age Kennedy described as “both knowledge and ignorance. The greater our knowledge increases, the greater our ignorance unfolds... where vast

stretches of the unknown and the unanswered and the unfinished still far outstrip our collective comprehension.”

Still others will serve as ground troops in Nixon’s war on cancer, consistently developing new weapons, reducing mortality rates and improving the odds of survival without raising any false hopes.

The naysayers and nattering nabobs of negativity still go gaga for the status quo. They still hoist their posters of slander and post their insults of ridicule, all the while still unable to grasp just how far medical science progressed while they stood yakking on the sidelines of their flat worlds.

The naysayers—they who have never prepared for a flood, delivered a moon shot or declared war on a disease—proclaim to possess the absolute knowledge that life does not translate to life, that discoveries made from lab animals have no correlation to the human condition. They know the world is flat!

Will we benefit from the Noah-like flood preparations of infectious diseases and bio-weapon research? That may be a Mount Ararat question not soon answered.

But what if, like Kennedy, we had some deadlines and time frame targets so we could boldly embrace ‘metal alloys not yet invented’ with a new hope that could grow somewhere between the irrational exuberance of post-human genome mapping and Nixon’s hypersensitivity to false hope?

What could we accomplish?

To the extent that science can ethically use all means possible to prevent, treat and cure human and animal disease, shouldn’t we reach for it? “Not because it is easy, but because it is hard?”

So to the 450,000 biomedical research explorers...build your ark, launch your rocket and wage your wars against disease with the focus of Noah, the boldness of Kennedy—and give us the hope that even Nixon would have enjoyed.

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