

Column: Xanadu Takes Flight



“In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/ A stately pleasure-dome decree,” or so the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge imagined. Kublai Khan was the Mongol emperor of what is today China, Mongolia, Tibet, Myanmar and many other regions in southern Asia. He had enormous wealth and power and could do whatever he wanted without having to hire public relations firms to make it all seem reasonable to his subjects. Coleridge was familiar with the fate of the extravagant French monarchs (remember Marie Antoinette) when he wrote this poem at the end of the eighteenth century, and he may have thought such lavish life-styles would be unattainable by future rulers. He was wrong. Vladimir Putin commands wealth and power that would have made the Khan envious, and Vlad allegedly recently completed a “private residence” that cost the people of Russia the equivalent of \$1.3 billion. Like the Khan, Putin was not obliged to explain his housing needs to the proletariat, and one might think these men were shop-a-holic anomalies unless one considers the spending habits of modern day billionaires.

Richard Branson recently returned to Earth after spending a few minutes near (but not in) outer space in his own rocket ship. Well-compensated advertising and public relations firms touted this as a major accomplishment, at least for a rich guy. They spoke of the wealth that would derive from “space-tourism,” apparently because they heard from several other rich people who wanted to experience five or six minutes of

weightlessness while trapped inside a missile. These thrill-seekers are willing to pay hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars for a ride on this space roller-coaster, but I doubt that there are many who would want to do it more than once. I doubt that any sober accountants, even those well-paid by Sir Richard himself, could make these flights of fancy appear cost-effective.

Of course, Richard Branson had the unconcealed objective of promoting his Virgin Atlantic and Virgin Galactic brands. His companies do fly airplanes, and showing versatility in flight allegedly instills confidence in his organizations. Despite his accomplishing less than Allen Shepherd achieved about 60 years ago and considerably less than Yuri Gagarin achieved more than 60 years ago, I am still not eager to board a Virgin Atlantic or other airplane. Yuri was the first man to orbit our planet, but despite his remarkable endurance and good luck, he died in an airplane crash. Enough said.

The world now awaits Jeff Bezos' attempt to enter suborbital space with friends and family. Billions have been spent on this adventure, and the man spending the money does not even own a major airline. He, like Branson, claims it is all about fulfilling a boyhood dream. I mean no disrespect for dreams that can be bought off the shelf from NASA, but are these folks unfamiliar with the history of people trapped in these perpetually fickle devices? I hesitate to mention the many lives lost when one of the hundreds of thousands of parts involved in the construction of these rockets failed. A brittle gasket split on a cold morning in Florida, and a space shuttle blew up. A piece of insulation struck a tile on the outside of another space shuttle, and the entire vehicle fell apart. As Bernard Baruch advised Winston Churchill after Churchill lost his money in the 1929 stock market crash, "This is not a game for amateurs."

Aside from mission failure, there are other risks associated with these multibillion dollar hobbies. Despite transparent marketing and public relations campaigns to make these space adventures look useful or at least sensible, the major players in this billionaires' gambit may end up looking more callous than heroic. There are several problems here at the surface of the planet that the money and power of a few billionaires could

permanently affect. We should tip our hats to Bill and Melinda Gates for making a real effort to eliminate polio from India, even if they are no longer on speaking terms with each other. There are many other wealthy people who have worked to improve the human condition, but there are still more who feel entitled to do whatever they want with the unimaginable wealth that they have accumulated or inherited. These people need to sit down with Marie Antoinette and discuss the dangers of building pleasure domes while the world around them collapses.

One such heart-to-heart with longstanding consequences was a discussion between John D. Rockefeller Sr. and his financial adviser Frederick Taylor Gates. Rockefeller and many of his contemporary rich guys felt that their wealth was at least in part a consequence of Divine intervention. They had good luck and good business timing, as well as helpful hints coming straight from their Maker. They were the Chosen, entrusted with the fate of nations or at least the fate of their banking systems. As Rockefeller's wealth grew to truly monstrous proportions, Gates advised him to surrender part of it. He reminded his boss of the fate of innumerable prior sovereigns. Rockefeller had money and power and a huge target on his back. Unless he got wiser, rather than richer, the townspeople of the nation would come up the hill with torches and pitchforks to take down the guy in the castle, metaphorically speaking.

Rockefeller was no fool. He recognized his vulnerability and decided to support numerous institutions that the general public would appreciate. He established the University of Chicago and Rockefeller University in New York. He created the Rockefeller Foundation and publicized its objective of eliminating diseases around the world. He promoted and helped fund many of the medical schools in the United States that have survived to this day.

There were, of course, missteps. He lobbied for and supported the Flexner Commission, a body established in partnership with the Carnegie Foundation to review the faculty and teaching at all of the American medical schools extant at the turn of the century (1900). The Commission identified numerous inadequate or simply fraudulent training

programs in the report it issued in 1910, but it also allowed racism into its assessments and labelled virtually every school with African-American students or faculty as unworthy of accreditation and claimed African-American physicians were a source of disease for the white people coming into contact with them.

Other multimillionaires and billionaires followed Rockefeller's lead and established Foundations that provided financial support for unambiguously useful or publicly valued enterprises. This excursion into altruism helped blunt public demands to dethrone these American power brokers. The value of not looking totally self-centered and juvenile appears to have been lost on many of our current money men and women. Their spending on private space ships, mega-yachts, hotel size mansions, and other trophies while billions of their fellow humans are struggling to get food and clean water cannot end well. There are still plenty of torches and pitchforks here on the ground that may be there to greet them when they step off their space ships.

Dr. Lechtenberg is an Easton resident who graduated from Tufts University and Tufts Medical School in Massachusetts and subsequently trained at The Mount Sinai Hospital and Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in Manhattan. He worked as a neurologist at several New York Hospitals, including Kings County and The Long Island College Hospital, while maintaining a private practice, teaching at SUNY Downstate Medical School, and publishing 15 books on a variety of medical topics. He worked in drug development in the USA, as well as in England, Germany, and France.