

Play It Again, Sam!

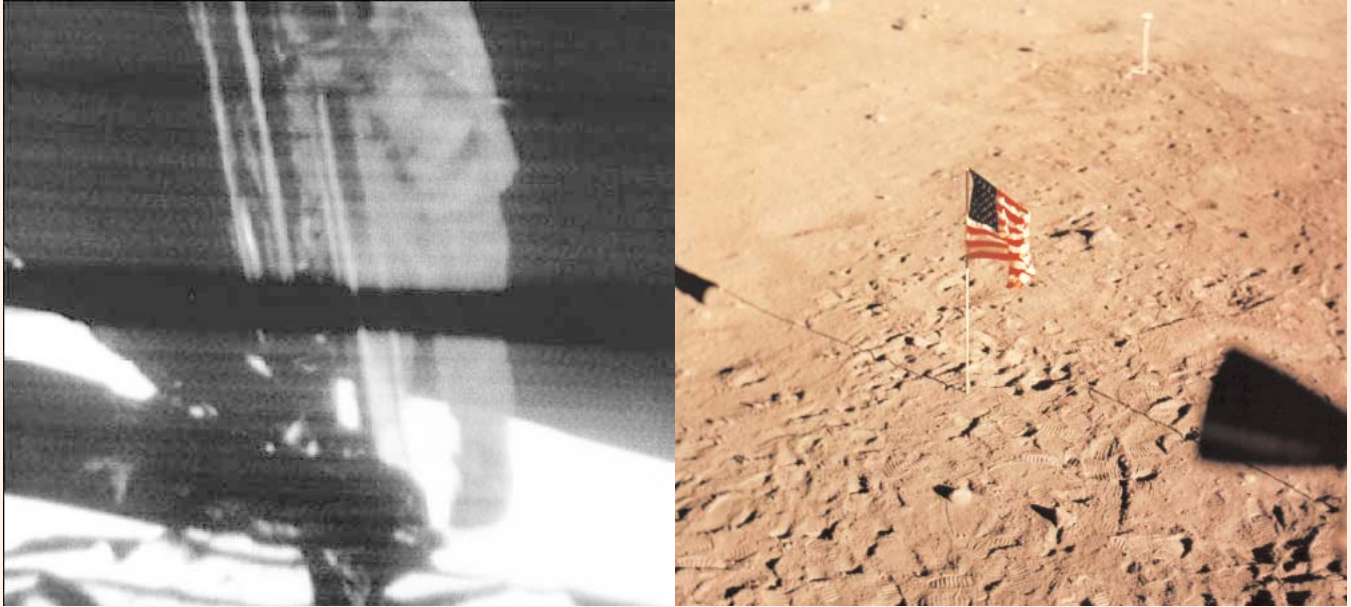
Does History Repeat Itself?

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It was a feat unimaginable just a generation before, yet in the space of a few short years this marvel of technology was accomplished in '69. What was it? He came to the very gates of Moscow only to be driven back - not by military force, but by Mother Russia's winter. Who was he? For years military students studied how to attack Pearl Harbor...before 1941! Which country was it? Come explore what these events tell us about history and ourselves.

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Play It Again, Sam!: Does History Repeat Itself?



It was the achievement of the century in a century full of modern miracles. It was not so much the technology as much as the scale of its application. No one could seriously imagine mankind crossing such a vast distance. It truly was unimaginable just a generation before, the stuff of cartoons. It was first seriously proposed in the '40s after the war, but it wasn't until the president committed us in '61 that it began in earnest. And the race was on. East versus West. It was just too big a project for any one company to pull off, only massive federal spending could make it happen. People questioned the utility of such expenditures, but Congress and the majority of the public were behind it. Two presidents and millions of dollars later and we arrived at the fateful moment in '69. The nation waited expectantly that day in May when men's dreams became reality. The nation listened to the countdown...the telegraph clicked once...twice...three times—and the deed was done. The last spike had been driven and the transcontinental railroad now connected the nation from east to west!

Does history repeat itself? The simple answer is 'No.' But before you all stop reading, let me continue. History does not repeat itself, but human behavior does repeat itself, over and over. We see it in our children AND in our parents. We may even recognize it in ourselves! The repetition teaches us what we are like as humankind, created by God and affected by the Fall. It confirms what God has been trying to get through to us generation by generation. All creation proclaims the glory of God and history only proves the greatness of God. And all history, all creation is summed up in Christ!

Let's start by quickly reviewing the nature, or the reality, that we exist and move within. We will look at three variables.

First off, we live in four dimensions as created by God—length width, depth, and time. I have heard told that there are many more, but these are the ones we are aware of on a daily basis. The first three comprise 'space.' Surprisingly, I CAN be in two different places in space... but not simultaneously. So the fourth dimension is our total experience of that space which we call 'time.'

The first variable is space. Space is everywhere! It is all around us. And to paraphrase Yogi Bera, wherever you go, there it is. Of course, we can't MAKE more space or improve upon it. It is independent of us. And yet...we are part of it. We occupy space as living beings. And the very atoms and molecules we are made up of could very well have been part of someone else in the past. That which has physical dimensions is part of space. It appears that space exists when and where objects exist. And where they don't, then there is no space.

The second variable is Time, or Events. As we experience it, Time is linear. It only goes in one direction. In fact it completely ignores us. We can neither go backwards in it nor can we jump forward nor can we speed it up or slow it down. We learn that events happen once and cannot be relived in the confines of the other three dimensions. Many distinct events can occur in the same “space,” but not simultaneously as we experience it. Events can be said to be continuously flowing together, like a river of logs floating down to the mill. We are able to discriminate the logs one from another into distinct events. And while all the logs look alike, yet we see that they ARE different from each other. Also, that same log does not float back upstream and come down past us again. So our experience of reality allows us to only experience one event at a time. And we cannot repeat any event. Please take note of that if any of you were planning to have a mid-life crisis.

But there is also another variable—and this one truly has variability. We have Space, Time, and ACTORS! Now, we people are notorious for not being able to live by our instincts like the animals. Instincts are just not built into our firmware. The point I want to make is that we are free agents in terms of how we will respond to any situation. Both anthropology and sociology are based on observing human behavior and then finding characteristics common to all humans. It is true that most people will react a certain way to a given set of circumstances. But the problem that both anthropology and sociology have is that they have not yet been able to turn their disciplines into predictive science. They both remain “soft” sciences. They can quantify, but they can’t qualify humankind—they cannot agree on the qualities specific to human beings...because humans can act outside of the box. They can act against their own interests in the interest of others.

People, then, are an independent variable, an unpredictable variable. Just as each log is different from all the others, so also are people. Each person is a distinct individual. Although we are like all the others of our kind, each one is not the same as anyone else. We (all) routinely tell our children (and other people who try to lump us together with some category of people) that *“just because Johnny does it doesn’t mean you have to.”* Or, *“I may be a (fill in the blank), but that doesn’t mean I do what they do.”* The reason of course is because we have free will. Even compulsion of outward behavior is not an accurate predictor for the future, like the young boy in church who complains that he may be sitting on the outside but he’s shouting on the inside. And to complicate things more, people change their minds...often...back and forth. What is more, we are sinful.

This points to a dimension that applies uniquely to humankind. God bestowed not only the breath of life on us, as He did to all living beings, but also His image. Without wanting to get involved theologically, let’s identify this dimension as “spirit.” It is that God-size hole in ourselves, that pervasive and underlying sense of eternity that gnaws at us when we think about the future. As far as we know, no animal thinks ABOUT the future—or dwells on the past. Animals pass on behavior, but not character. Humans have an involvement and a sense of purpose with the Creation that none of the animals have ever evidenced. That testifies to the purpose God gave us in Genesis 1. That is part of God’s image, to participate in the Creation and to promote its well-being. The other part is to be in fellowship with its Creator, to even join the fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit. The apostle John reported Jesus’ teaching on this during the Last Supper. We are part of the Creation and yet we are also meant to reach outside of it. But...God has determined that we cannot do that under compulsion. We must choose to do so. And we all must choose how to respond to God who calls us to seek Him and to join Him. And if we choose to join Him, it must be on His terms, not our own.

Okay. So we have three variables: Space and Time which are really constants in our experience, and us Actors who are unpredictable moment by moment. Now let’s move ahead and look for a pattern in how we live out life over time.

Culturally we talk of how the pendulum swings back and forth over the course of a generation.

Someone once said *“If I am not a liberal when I am young, I have no heart. If I am not a conservative when I am old, I have no head.”* That person is acknowledging how we can observe a change of attitudes and behaviors over the course of a person’s life. He even tacitly recognizes that this is true not just for an

occasional person, but for people in general. People in their strivings to be different, to be themselves, only prove how much alike we all are. You know the delightful contradiction of my own generation when we were college students. We all wanted to 'be ourselves' and to 'do our own thing.' We did not want to be the 'organization man,' 'the man in the gray flannel suit' from IBM. Not us. WE all had long hair. WE all wore blue jeans. WE wore old surplus army jackets and used the same slang and protested the same things. WE were different...from them...but not from each other. And in the end, not really from THEM either, the generations who came before us. Flappers, bobby soxers, flower children—the names change, but not what is going on. To quote Solomon, *"there is nothing new under the sun."* (Ecc1:9c) Or to hear Shakespeare say it, *"Life is full of sound and fury signifying nothing."*

But going back to that gentleman who discovered his heart in his youth and his head in his old age. The question he leaves unanswered is 'What if I have no spirit?' How does sin affect spirit then, as well as the four dimensions? We find ourselves in a new dimension called Dilemma. The spirit in us has been so tarnished that God cannot abide with us, his own creation, lest we die in the very presence of His Awesomeness. Yet, without Him, we ARE dead. WE, the reflection of His image, have been marred—corrupted. What is more, Space has become a hardship rather than a dynamo/nourishment provider. And Time moves us forward toward an end we dread, as the writer of Ecclesiastes bemoaned. The end is death which means our inability to experience our four dimensions AND our Creator.

We have talked a little about our own lives and how we recycle history. And we have mentioned how each generation also repeats the cycle. We can take the analogy one step further, peoples, nations and civilizations have a life cycle. France, for example, as a nation measures it by republics. The Chinese measure it by dynasties. But if we think of ourselves as a people, we find that a people is more durable. The French as a people still feel some sort of kinship with the Germanic tribes who fought Julius Caesar, and the Chinese go back three millennium. All of them have some trouble taking seriously the United States which has only been around some three centuries. They might quote Solomon, *"there is nothing new under the sun."* And yet, there is an anomaly at work here. Although less than 300 years old, the United States has the oldest continuing government.

People groups mark their life cycle by the events that affect them, their touchstones, their memory stones. The Jews still talk about the Diaspora and teach the world to never forget the Holocaust. Americans remember Pearl Harbor and Kennedy's assassination. These events define what they value and believe about themselves. They reveal who they are. If we look at all peoples, they show what we, collectively as a kind, are like.

Now, depending on how we look at things, history can possibly serve one of two purposes. By observing the past it can predict the future. And by observing the past it can tell us about the present, and about ourselves. If people truly have a free will, then history can never predict a George Washington or an Adolf Hitler. It cannot predict individuals. That is because too much of what we do is based on our values rather than strictly on our physical needs. A group will tend to do certain actions. A people will acquire their own preferences. But individuals can fly in the face of all standard operating procedures. And God has an agenda for us in all of this.

"He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime... That which is has been already, and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by... I said to myself concerning the sons of men, 'God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts, for the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same.'" (Ecclesiastes3:11-2,15,18-19a)

Solomon was a cynic, yet even he could see that in the face of death, everything we do is useless to us once we are dead. God is testing us in this life. Will we seek Him, or ignore Him? Will we seek Him in all we do? Will we enjoy the good gifts from His hand? For us who call upon Him, these are rhetorical questions.

Let's look at the stories mentioned in the abstract and find Him in them.

How long did it take you to guess that my first story was about the Transcontinental Railroad and not about Apollo 11 to the moon? The two accomplishments have parallels. They both represented a challenge and an achievement of great magnitude, of succeeding in doing the near impossible. They both demonstrate what can be done when a group of people have a common goal and a passion to do it. And the world becomes a different place afterwards. The wild, unknown frontier becomes domesticated and civilized. This is humankind when we set our minds on what can be imagined and attempt what has been assumed to be impossible to accomplish. It shows the best of man the achiever, man who has dominion over all of the earth.

So what about the invasion of Russia I mentioned in the abstract? Adolf Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 and reached the outskirts of Moscow before winter overwhelmed his armies. But he was not the first. Napoleon Bonaparte suffered the same fate over a century earlier. Is this an example of repeat events? I think not. This is very like the first example, doing what can be imagined but which no one can accomplish. What is different? Well, there is a pride involved in both cases. This is a case where we have such a self confidence about our wisdom and insight that we presume to will be immune from the same consequences that happened to others. *They* were ignorant. *We* are advanced. Hmmm...Proverbs—'pride goes before a fall.' In our first example there is a building of something, a creating something new, an improvement. In this example there is a tearing down, destruction, violence. Which one fulfills the Genesis mandate?

And what about the invasion of Pearl Harbor? The Japanese indeed studied how to do so for years before they actually executed the attack. It was a graduation question for the students in their war college. But guess what...so did the Americans. The Navy war games executed such an attack and succeeded in 1932 and 1938. Gen. George Patton even described how it could be done in 1937. In fact, Gen. Billy Mitchell wrote a report about how it could be done 17 years before it happened. Remember Billy Mitchell? He proved that airplanes could sink battleships in 1921. He was court-martialed in 1925 for insubordination by insisting that the Navy wasn't a strong enough shield against a foreign attack. Repeat events or repeat behavior? Proverbs again, "*a man's ways lead to death, but the Lord gives life.*" I think it's a case of our pre-conceived notions leading us into willful self deceptions. When the code breakers deciphered Japanese messages that forewarned of a pre-emptive first strike against U.S. military installations, the consensus was that it would happen in the Philippines, not at Pearl Harbor as Gen. Mitchell predicted.

And then there is the anomaly of the U.S. government. The Founding Fathers wrestled with the challenge of coming up with a new way to run a federal government unlike all governments that had gone before. I talk about this in another article. It will have to suffice here to say that they learned and debated the lessons of history. They knew a lot about what others had done, even in their own time. They knew about Greece and Rome, the Swiss and Dutch federations, the German confederation, Italian city states and the Iroquois confederation, and kingdoms of old as well as one to which they had once belonged. And in spite of their idealism about forming a better government, they held no illusions about the people who would comprise it. And what they created has met the test of time—or, as we are viewing it here, the wisdom of their decisions and the consequences of their actions revealed itself to be basically good.

You know, there are a couple of general ways to understand History. The eastern societies see History as some cycle that goes around and around again and again. No one can break out of it. Solomon expresses that thought repeatedly in Ecclesiastes. The Buddhists talk about the cycle of Karma. Western ideas basically see history as a series a random events, and purposeless. Some see us going towards utopia and others toward anarchy. Followers of Christ can accept both views. Because of our inherent sinfulness, we see humankind repeating the same choices, making the same mistakes. At the same time, we see randomness in human behavior because we still have free will. We can still choose, and must all the time. But we also know that there is an overarching theme to history, to life. God has a Mission. We know it because He has revealed it. Without such revelation we could not discover it. We would only be left with the first two options. But we now know it, and it colors everything we do and think. We know that Christ breaks the cycle of Karma, and that all that is done under the sun will show God to be excellent, glorious, good.

Now having said all these words, it is time to do a reality check. How does all this fit with what God is about as recorded in the Bible? God *has* a Mission. He is about redemption and restoration. We are explicitly told that it is all summed up in Jesus Christ. What is more, everyone who responds to Him becomes part of His Mission. We have joined in the process of redemption. We become His reflections in the world. One day we will gather round His throne and praise Him to His face—people from every society and every age.

So, History does not repeat itself. It is not an IT that can act on ITs own. IT is merely a record of the outworkings of our human nature. IT is a testimony of what WE are like. IT confirms to us what God has revealed about our selves and our condition. It also testifies not only about God's truthfulness, but also about His faithfulness in those of us who follow Him and His ways, who live like He does in this world. When history seems to repeat itself, that intrigues us and stimulates us to look closer into the matter. But no matter how deep we look into it, we should not find that history is a crystal ball that will show us the future, but a mirror that reveals ourselves and God more fully. History does not repeat itself—God repeats Himself to us, telling us what He is about, and we reiterate it over and over with our lives.

That history does repeat itself teaches us something about what we are like. Will we perceive it?

