

Introduction:

The Meaning of This Memoir

Six hundred years ago the famous Arab judge, general, politician, and minister Ibn-Khaldun wrote his great work of historiography, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (1377), in order to explain to himself why all of his determined and creative efforts aimed at good government had always ended in disaster.

After thirty-seven years of public interest activities, I decided to reexamine a much less exalted effort. It seemed worth asking, in the spirit of Ibn-Khaldun, why some success was achieved on those occasions when it was, and why, in others, no significant, or lasting, impact seems to have been made. Was success no more than the result of collective effort? Was failure simply the result of numerous actors working at cross-purposes? Or could ingenuity, hard work, or the political judgment of an individual become a critical factor in success, and lack of it a reason for failure? Was President Kennedy right when he said, “One man can make a difference”? And was this why “every man should try”?

Certainly another part of the motivation for this memoir was personal, summed up in the aphorism that a life unexamined is a life not fully lived, combined with my becoming sixty years of age. I wondered if any of my work—my life, in a sense—had been provably worthwhile.

But another part of the motivation was civic—to determine whether my experiences had anything to teach others about the

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process of public interest activism in the modern Western world. Still deeper was a hope that something might turn up that would assist in the generic goal of encouraging my brand of public interest activism.

And what is that brand? There is, of course, a zoo of different nongovernmental groups; accordingly, public interest activism takes many different forms, and the degree and kind of ingenuity and creativity required of the participating individuals varies greatly. Public interest activists may be working with such a large group of activists with a similar goal or, for whatever reason, taking such a minor role in directing the campaign, that their activism is highly programmed and offers little strategic choice of topic or originality of tactics. By contrast, I had much autonomy.

Even for public interest activists who have much scope for creative maneuver, there are quite different *modi operandi*. For example, among my colleagues in public interest science, some are actually solving scientific problems as part of an effort to advance the solution of public policy dilemmas. Others are involved in giving science advice to government, such as organizing and drafting studies, administering or maintaining advice-giving organizations, or trying to ensure the functioning of the White House science advisory apparatus. Some are basically servicing the media with informed commentary on a range of high-tech and arms race issues. Others are working to put together the scientific basis for resolving issues where science impacts society while maneuvering to advance related solutions.

Whatever they are doing, to the extent that public interest activists like these are required to show ingenuity and enterprise in solving public policy dilemmas, they are called here, for want of a better phrase: entrepreneurial activists. Entrepreneurial activism has much in common, in the world of ideas, with capitalist entrepreneurship. Of course, the activist gets (only) psychic return rather than financial return. But he or she has to plan campaigns much as a capitalist organizes a business, and must develop a constituency for his or her idea, just as a businessperson develops a body of customers.

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One fact of life of entrepreneurial activism is that, all too often, only the activists know exactly what it is they have tried to accomplish and how, because so much is carried out behind the scenes. In many cases, the actors they influence prefer to hide what influenced them or they just forget. And sometimes the activists themselves are quite ignorant of the extent to which success can be attributed to their valiant efforts.

With all this in mind, I decided simply to recount what had happened in about two dozen campaigns in which I had engaged. Thus the chapters of this volume are, in a way, case studies from the point of view of a single activist, but they are, I think, less dry than that sounds. The volume itself is, really, the documented life of an activist with more than five hundred notes. (To simplify consulting the notes, I have listed them in consecutive order at the end of the book, and to encourage the reader to consult them, the more interesting of the substantive notes have their superscripts in brackets, so that a ²⁰ will come to be ^[20].)

Throughout more than a third of a century of activism—even during the last three decades, when I had the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) as a platform—I was still a very small actor on a large planet working on intractable problems held in place by strong forces. The reader will wonder how on earth I could have hoped, during this period, to have accomplished anything—much less hope, today, that the historical record might show some signs of it.

One explanation lies in chaos theory, in which a basic metaphor is the butterfly that flaps its wings in Paris and somehow causes a storm in New York. The sometime instability of a situation—not uncommon in political affairs, where ideas spread rapidly to powerful actors—can turn a small force into a big one. Activism is chaos theory applied in a political context that is, in the modern Western world, especially chaotic.

Accordingly, I decided to try to write a memoir that would remind the reader, as I sought to remind myself, by what narrow and often random margins of circumstance success or failure was

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determined, and by what quiet decisions important paths were taken or rejected. More generally, I wanted to know where the decision-points were in my activities and in my life.

For this reason the text is decorated with four symbols. A butterfly flapping its wings appears whenever I or someone else, through an act of will, enterprise, or decision, starts some kind of important breeze. It signals the reader that from this act something important happened, as will be seen later in the story. It looks like this:



Often, past and future events are linked by small connections that have more than the usual significance but are the results not of some deliberate act of will but just of random circumstance. Here the text shows a chain to symbolize a chain of circumstances. The symbol looks like this:



Sometimes, my life or my undertaking has been deeply affected by a decision that opened a door or closed a door in some fashion; here I show an open or closed door:



This memoir is not a book about the total achievements of FAS during the past twenty-nine years I have been its chief executive officer, and does not include achievements of other FAS staffers during that period—they will have to write their own books. I have dwelled only on those activities in which I played a leading role. On the other hand, it would have been quite impossible for me to accomplish anything during this period without the opportunity provided by FAS. The official support of its members and officials, the advice whenever needed, the autonomy of operation permitted, the balanced oversight provided, and the encouragement always available were all essential to my undertakings.

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No less essential was the loving help of my wife of four decades, B.J., whose collaboration actually included learning Russian, some Chinese, and some Spanish, as well as editing my articles and memoir with unsurpassed skill.

Making a difference is, of course, the energizing motivation of public interest activists; having devoted a lifetime to trying to make a difference, they would hardly be human if they didn't wish to reflect on the extent to which they may have succeeded.

Accordingly, it is therapeutic for activists to write this kind of self-investigative memoir. It's a little bit like the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, wherein an angel shows a depressed hero what his life may have meant. I commend it to my entrepreneurial colleagues.

Finally, only too conscious of the imperfections of this memoir, of the limitations of activist campaigns upon which it reports, and of how little anyone can know of what actually transpired, I wish to offer the concluding sentiments of Ibn-Khaldun's foreword to *The Muqaddimah*, where he writes, "The capital of knowledge that an individual scholar has to offer is small. Admission [of one's shortcomings] saves from censure. Kindness from colleagues is hoped for."

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