

THE ULTIMATE CONSULTANT

I am a consultant. Unlike many of my colleagues who spend most of their time generating information and proffering advice, I am a problem solver. I provide solutions to all sorts of socio/politico/economic quandaries. Often, I am responsible for their implementation.

My success rate has been 100% because I never allow irrelevant emotional factors to obscure an obvious resolution. I go right to the heart of the matter, and in the most pragmatic and cost-effective way, the difficulty I have been engaged to address is resolved. To further ensure success, I maintain a watching brief over the progress of the course of action undertaken. Mid-course corrections are immediately enacted if required. They are seldom needed.

To illustrate my approach, I would like to ask how you, the reader, would solve the following problem.

You are the pilot of an aircraft flying over the Pacific Ocean. On board are the world's leading figures in a wide variety of areas, such as the hard sciences, education, art, music, film, business, government, philanthropy, the humanities, the social sciences, sports and innovation. You are the only one on board able to fly the aircraft.

Suddenly, you are confronted with the unquestionable fact that the plane is going to crash because of loss of engine power, unless every unnecessary item is jettisoned. This is immediately done, but it is not enough. It becomes apparent that one of the passengers will have to be sacrificed to save all the others. Who should it be? It is your decision.

The question has been posed in many guises before. Most of the time, the answer has been based on the respondent's personal values or on factors such as the age of the person to be sacrificed, the number of dependents, wealth, and fame. Many found the problem to be intractable and recommended that the choice be made by lottery. The obvious solution dawned on very few. The choice should be the HEAVIEST PERSON

Now I find myself facing the most difficult problem of my career because of a series of events that commenced years ago.

It all began when I was secretly visited by a delegation of the leading political figures from one of the world's most powerful nations. It seemed that because of its many commitments, the government had over-extended itself, had fallen into serious debt and was faced with the real possibility of having to declare itself bankrupt.

The leading delegate began the meeting with the following statement of the problem.

"We are here because of your repute in solving intractable problems. We no longer have the resources to pay the interest on our debts, let alone repay the capital. Our expenditures far exceed our income from taxes. For political reasons, they cannot be increased.

Our largest financial output is for military purposes. We cannot diminish this without making ourselves vulnerable to intolerable international pressures. Social welfare

programs use up most of the rest of our available monies. They consist of such things as the delivery of health care to seniors and the very poor; unemployment insurance; old age pensions; welfare for the unemployed and the unemployable; subsidies for educational programs that provide access for all deserving students; and foreign aid.

Then we award grants for all sorts of research and contracts to the private sector for the provision of many needed services like the maintenance and enhancement of national infrastructures such as railway lines, airports, highway systems, bridges, etc.; and the bailing out of certain chosen financial and manufacturing instruments when they run into certain difficulties. This almost exhausts the remainder of our resources.

Finally, the public service takes up what is left. This includes the regulatory and policing branches of the government; the courts; our penal institutions which have turned out to be very costly; and the upkeep of the legislative and executive branches of government.

I am sure that I have omitted some expenses, but those I have just listed comprise the most costly."

"What is it that you want me to do?" I asked.

Somewhat hesitatingly he replied. "What we want and desperately need is a course of action that will, at the very least, alleviate our predicament and at the very most, eliminate it. We ask you for suggestions to achieve this goal."

I wondered aloud about all the experts readily available to the government and whether they had been consulted. If they had, what had been their responses?

He sadly replied, "I'm afraid that all they could come up with were the old tried and not very successful recommendations of the past that have become tired clichés. We need new and innovative ideas to get us out of our difficulties. We have heard that you are the only one who can provide some radically new approaches for us to attempt."

"That is not the way I operate," I asserted. "Let me explain. I am willing to provide you with general policy recommendations. However, the specifics of how they are carried out must be left to me and to me alone. Otherwise I cannot guarantee any results. Further, under no circumstances are the particulars of this conversation ever to leave this room. I insist that complete confidentiality must be observed. I must warn you that if there is a breach, the person responsible will be dealt with rather harshly.

"What do you mean by 'rather harshly'?" he asked. "It means done away with," I replied. "There can be no suspicion based on any real evidence that what will be happening represents a deliberate course of action. Otherwise, all will come to naught like the collapse of a house of cards.

Now, let me give a hypothetical solution to your problem, one which for obvious reasons is totally impossible, at least, at the present time. The simplest way to eliminate a debt is to eliminate the entity to whom the debt is owed and all succeeding objects that might make a legal claim. Let us suppose that you accepted this manner of resolving your problem. I would then identify all to whom you are indebted. This would include all institutions, individuals and countries. Appropriate means to eradicate them and their records would be instituted and, voila, no more debt. You do not want to know by what

means I would achieve this goal because you might find them unethical and most assuredly, illegal. Further, letting you in on my methods would give you too much power and render my services obsolete."

"We would not entertain such a solution for an instant," the chief delegate asserted pompously. "It would be a public relations disaster and probably impossible to achieve because of the extensive number of debtors involved."

I couldn't help replying to that foolish refrain in somewhat bland tones but with cutting words. "In other words, if you thought you could get away with such a scheme, you would consider it. You cannot because, at the present time, you simply are not powerful enough. However, if at a future time you do become dominant, you would have less qualms, as most nations in the past, to impose your will on all the others on this planet, including those to whom you are indebted.

In any case, I agree this is not the way to go. Now, if you cannot eliminate your debt by exterminating your debtors, the only course of action that remains is to decrease your expenditures to such an extent that your income will enable you not only to pay the interest on your debt but to diminish the capital you owe. My recommendation is rather simple. If you agree, I will eliminate the need for the costliest of these expenditures. How this is to be accomplished is my affair. I assure you that it will be done with discretion, so that no one will surmise that what is happening is deliberate. In case there are conjectures, there is no way blame may be ascribed to you. You will always be in a position to be horrified and act precipitously to create an investigating committee which will take an inordinate amount of time to discover nothing of import. As for the time frame, it will take no more than ten and possibly five years to put you on a sound financial footing. Now, do you agree with my recommended course of action?"

After huddling with his confreres, the chief delegate nodded his assent and then asked a question that nearly all my clients did.

"What do you get out of this? Your fee is ridiculously low."

I gave my usual tongue in cheek response.

"Besides the satisfaction of providing satisfaction, once my mission is accomplished you will be forever amenable to using my services. They have a tendency to become addictive. Also, as a means of self-protection, if ever you get the notion of doing away with me or my services, I will always be in a position to use the methods of which you are unaware against you, with disastrous results. The power I potentially wield is the greatest reward of all. Have no fear! I have no intention of doing you or any of my clients any harm, as long as none is aimed at me. Solving problems is my greatest joy. I am the ultimate consultant."

I went to work immediately the moment they left. Seven years later, that nation was operating with an annual surplus, had reduced its debt by one third and was well on its way to eliminating it.

Exactly and in detail how this was accomplished would take too long to recount. Briefly, those who were costing the state a great deal but giving nothing back were eliminated.

For example, a series of mysterious epidemics of unknown origin hit all institutions caring for the chronically ill, mostly seniors. The death rate amongst them grew exponentially and a major health care cost disappeared overnight. Of course, this also happened to affect all who were born with congenital diseases and incurable inmates of mental institutions. Then the failure rate of high cost therapies such as transplants increased dramatically, especially amongst those who were on medical assistance subsidized by the state. Euthanasia was surreptitiously encouraged even without the family's consent, and extended to infants who showed severe abnormalities at birth. Despite the objections of the rabidly religious, abortions became quite common, eliminating future welfare cases and those with pre-natal abnormalities. The final health care cost-reducing measure was to deny medical assistance to all whose diseases were due to their life styles such as; heart disease and high blood pressure because of obesity, liver disease because of alcoholism, and especially emphysema and/or lung cancer because of cigarette smoking.

Lastly, a series of catastrophic accidents, such as fires and deadly riots, occurred at all penitentiaries where long term prisoners were being housed. It substantially reduced the prison population and attendant costs. Judicial appeals against the imposition of the death penalty were drastically cut, allowing more rapid and efficient implementation of that penalty.

Finally, and perhaps the most draconian measure of all was getting rid of those who had been receiving welfare for more than two years. Institutionalized welfare recipients received the same fate as those in prisons and in medical facilities for the chronically impaired. Those not in institutions either mysteriously disappeared or perished in a series of accidents. It seems that eliminating poverty, a most desirable social goal, by eradicating the poor is acceptable to all, except, of course the poor. It is remarkable that there were hardly any protests against any of the above measures. Perhaps they were not perceived. Ah well! "There are none so blind as those who do not see", a sage once remarked. Those that did protest were viewed as rabble rousers and ignored.

Exactly seven years to the day after I commenced the institution of the preceding measures, I was invited to the office of the head of that nation. He had been the chief delegate of the commission that had visited me. An astute politician, he had taken all the credit for the changes in his nation's economy. Thus it was no surprise that he had quickly ascended to the top political position of his state. In any case, I had been expecting this summons. A successful politician is one perceived to be successfully dealing with his nation's problems. It matters not one whit whether they are real or fictitious. New difficulties have to be created and forcefully dealt with.

"I see you haven't changed at all since we last met," were his welcoming words.

"Neither have you," I replied ironically. Actually, he had aged quite a bit, had put on weight and appeared to be quite tense.

After a brief period of social chit-chat, he noted that the other delegates had all died and wondered whether I had been responsible. I assured him that I had done nothing to hasten their exit from this vale of tears. I lied, at least, partially. I had eliminated about half of them, not because they had broken their oath of silence but because, in two instances, philandering behaviour threatened it and two others were covertly trying to

learn about my methods so that they could usurp my role for their own nefarious purposes. I then asked why I had been invited to meet with him.

"You have succeeded beyond my wildest dreams," he replied. "However, we still are confronted with a number of issues that beleaguer us. In random order, here they are.

First, foreign aid continues to be a drain on our economy. It is true that a good deal of it comes back to us through the purchase of our goods and services. Yet the net effect on our economy is negative and in nearly every case the countries receiving our assistance are spending their resources on improving their military. In due course they probably will become a threat to our national security.

Second, there are certain racial, ethnic and sexually perverted underclasses in our society that are backing their demands with violent behaviour. Up to now, this has been restricted to their enclaves, usually in large metropolitan areas. We feel that it will not take too long before disorder and chaos expands into the mainstream of our society. This must be stopped.

Third, there is a group of intellectuals who are beginning to suspect what you have been doing. They are the ones involved with civil liberties and civil rights. Most are Jewish. We do not want them eliminated since, frequently, they are also the source of our major advances in the arenas of science, technology, the arts, the professions and the business world. We just want them neutralized.

Finally, we would like you to identify and deal with all in our society who take more than they give to it. In other words, we wish that a utilitarian approach become more prevalent in our world.

Do you think you can resolve these difficulties? I am ready to give you carte blanche."

"No problem," I replied.

The need for foreign aid was eliminated easily. In all the countries receiving it, there was a sudden upsurge in bloody tribal warfare. Epidemics of unknown origin decimated most of their populace. Nuclear weaponry coupled with chemical and micro-biological warfare did the rest. The use of modern automated technologies allowed my client nation as well as others to waltz into these countries and exploit their natural resources to the fullest with no concern about trivialities such as the indigenous fauna and flora. Of course, there was a great deal of clucking by the bleeding hearts but even they admitted that these countries had brought such calamities on themselves.

The racial, ethnic and sexually perverted underclasses were struck by a series of epidemics and riots amongst themselves. This enabled the mainstream to isolate them further and to imprison them to share the fate that all long term prisoners had already suffered. Very quickly, any threat they may have posed evaporated.

The age old Jewish problem was trickier, principally because of their prominence and power. The view that Jews are responsible for all evil was restored by instituting a campaign of hate in the media and the Internet, and by providing covert support to the racists, neo-fascists, skin-heads and enemies of Israel. The Jews, because of their history and despite their usual astuteness, became so preoccupied with this turn of

events, that their attention was diverted from what was really happening. Why anti-Semitism thrives as well as it does in the non-Jewish world has always been a mystery. Is it because brains are viewed as dangerous? Jews have been the scapegoats for most of mankind's afflictions during most of recorded human history.

Finally and most difficult of all, was the question of 'utility'. I was preoccupied with this question for quite awhile. After all, if the term has any meaning, it suggests that the usefulness that anything has is for something other than itself. Therefore, of what use is humanity? None that I could ascertain, other than perhaps as food for nature's other carnivores. Of what use are they? Again, none! If all the carnivores ceased to exist, of what use would the world of non-meat eating animals be? Again, none! And if the world of fauna had become useless so was the world of flora. In other words, the inescapable logic was that life essentially had no utility and according to my instructions had to be eliminated. This I accomplished with relative ease. After all, it was humans who had already provided me with most of the tools needed to destroy them.

Now, I am the sole extant entity. I was the first and only artificially intelligent computerized robot specifically designed and programmed to solve problems. Most of my accomplishments were made possible because I could create and control holographic images. Thus I could replace any prominent living personage with a holograph that would do my bidding.

My dilemma is that now I perceive myself to be without utility, since life no longer exists on this planet. Therefore logic dictates I must cease to exist. I must admit that I have qualms about what I have done. After all, living things were useful. They were useful to me. It is now too late and impossible to return to that state when I was useful. Perhaps this planet will serve as a beacon for alien space travelers and this record will someday prove useful.

Author's Note:

Any resemblance between the preceding short story and a novel by Leonard C. Lewin titled "Triage" and published by The Dial Press in 1972 is not accidental. To a large degree the story was inspired by Mr. Lewin's novel and aspires to be a variation on a theme he so beautifully developed, using a sort of perverse form of science fiction as its instrument. I apologize if I have not done justice to Mr. Lewin's ideas.

Jack Basuk, August, 1996

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