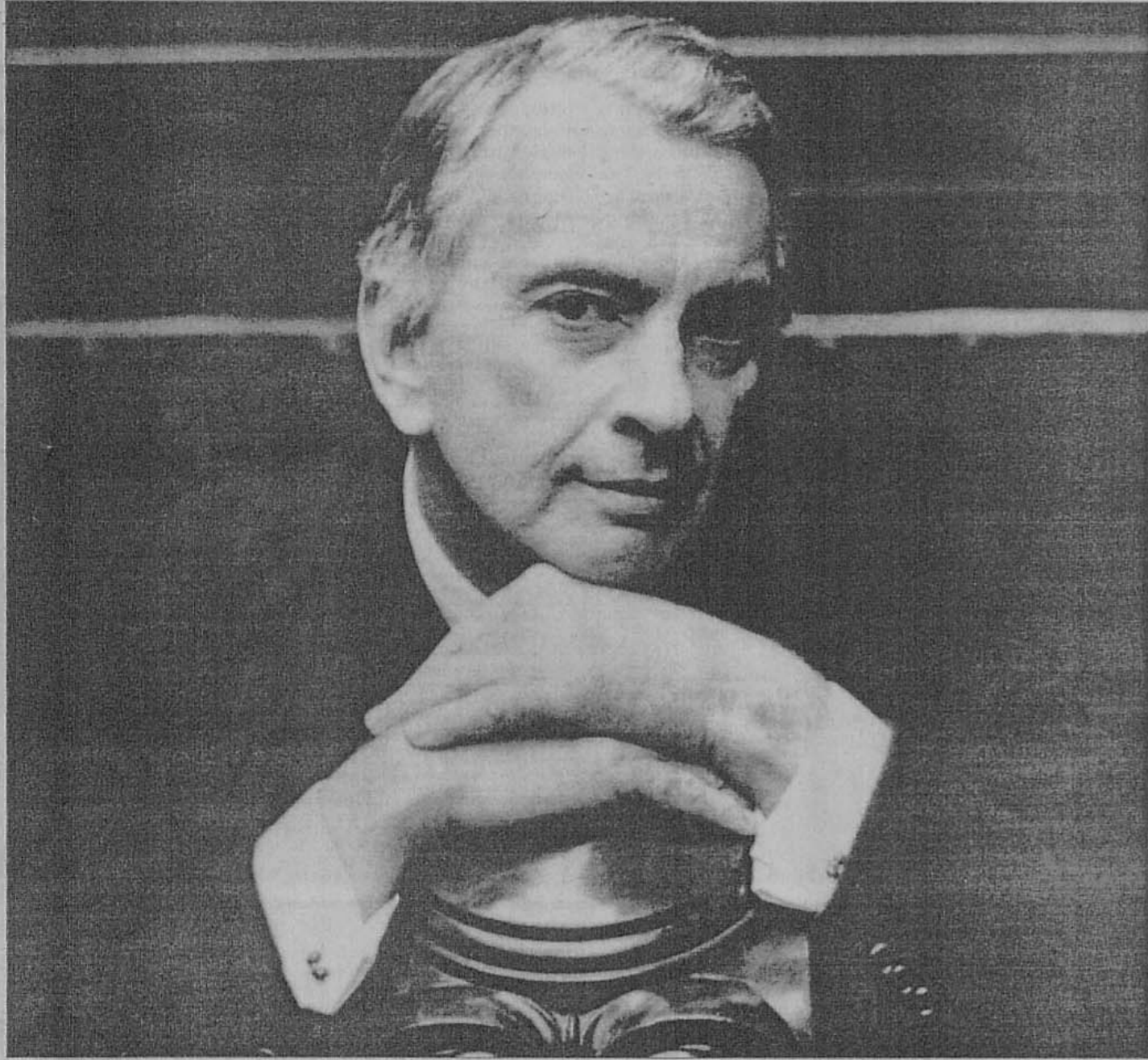


Newton's third law



DAVID BARSAMIAN

ORE Vidal is a gold mine of quips and zingers. And his vast knowledge of literature and history -- particularly American -- makes for an impressive figure. His razor-sharp tongue lacerates the powerful. He does it with aplomb, saying, "Style is knowing who you are, what you want to say, and not giving a damn." He has a very sense of noble obligation: "There is no human problem which could not

be solved if people would simply do as I advise." Now eighty, he lives in the Hollywood hills in a modest mansion with immodest artwork. I felt I was entering a museum of Renaissance art. A stern painting of the Emperor Constantine was looking down upon us as we sat in his majestic living room. A Buddha statue from Thailand stood nearby. But all was not somber. He had a Bush doll with a 9/11 bill sticking out of it on a table behind us. His aristocratic pedigree is

evident not just in his artistic sophistication but also in his locution. In a war of words, few can contend with Vidal. "I'm a lover of the old republic and I deeply resent the empire our Presidents put in its place," he declares. Vidal moved gingerly and was using a cane. A recent knee operation left him less mobile. He says, "The mind is still agile but the knees have grown weak." We sat in upholstered chairs. On a nearby table I saw the galleys of his second memoir, Point to Point Navigation.

It will be out this fall. His earlier one, Palimpsest, came out in 1995. Prolific does not even begin to describe Vidal's literary output. He's the author of scores of novels, plays, screenplays, essays. In 1993, he won the National Book Award for his collection of essays, United States. His recent books (he calls them "pamphlets") -- Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace, Dreaming War, and Imperial America -- have sold in huge numbers. When I asked him what was the point of his work, he said, "I am chronicling

America." The prose, whether polemical or fictional, is elegant. Distantly related to Jackie Kennedy, he does not romanticize JFK. "He was one of the most charming men I've ever known," says Vidal. "He was also one of the very worst Presidents." He's been a Democratic candidate for the House from New York and for the Senate from California. Today, he ridicules the Democrats for supineness. He sees a certain continuity in US foreign policy over the last fifty years. "The management, then and now, truly believes the United States is the master of the Earth and anyone who defies us will be napalmed or blockaded or covertly overthrown," he says. "We are beyond law, which is not unusual for an empire; unfortunately, we are also beyond common sense." I talked with him on a hot afternoon in mid-April. Barsamian: In 2002, long before Bush's current travails, you wrote, "Mark my words, he will leave office the most unpopular President in history." How did you know that then? Vidal: I know these people. I don't say that as though I know them personally. I know the types. I was brought up in Washington. When you are brought up in a zoo, you know what's going on in the monkey house. You see a couple of monkeys loose and one is President and one is Vice President, you know it's trouble. Monkeys make trouble. Bush's ratings have been at personal lows. Cheney has had an 18 percent approval rating. Well, he deserves it. Yet the wars go on. It's almost as if the people don't matter. The people don't matter to this gang. They pay no attention. They think in totalitarian terms. They've got the troops. They've got the army. They've got Congress. They've got the judiciary. Why should they worry? Let the chattering classes chatter. Bush is a thug. I think there is something really wrong with him. What do you think of the conspiracy theories about September 11? I'm willing to believe practically any mischief on the part of the Bush people. No, I don't think they did it, as some conspiracy people think. Why? Because it was too intelligently done. This is beyond

the competence of Bush and Cheney and Rumsfeld. They couldn't pull off a caper like 9/11. They are too clumsy. Today the United States is fighting two wars, one in Afghanistan and one in Iraq, and is now threatening to launch a third one on Iran. What is it going to take to stop the Bush onslaught? Economic collapse. We are too deeply in debt. We can't service the debt, or so my financial friends tell me, that's paying the interest on the Treasury bonds, particularly to the foreign countries that have been financing us. I think the Chinese will say the hell with you and pull their money out of the United States. That's the end of our wars. You're a veteran of World War II, the so-called good war. Would you recommend to a young person a career in the armed forces in the United States? No, but I would suggest Canada or New Zealand as a possible place to go until we are rid of our warmongers. We've never had a government like this. The United States has done wicked things in the past to other countries but never on such a scale and never in such an existentialist way. It's as though we are evil. We strike first. We'll destroy you. This is an eternal war against terrorism. It's like a war against dandruff. There's no such thing as a war against terrorism. It's idiotic. These are slogans. These are lies. It's advertising, which is the only art form we ever invented and developed. But our media has collapsed. They've questioned no one. One of the reasons Bush and Cheney are so daring is that they know there's nobody to stop them. Nobody is going to write a story that says this is not a war, only Congress can declare war. And you can only have a war with another country. You can't have a war with bad temper or a war against paranoids. Nothing makes any sense, and the people are getting very confused. The people are not stupid, but they are totally misinformed. You've called the country "The United States of Amnesia." Is this something in our genes? No, it's something in our rulers. They don't want us to know anything. When you've got a press like we have, you no longer have an informed citizenry.

I was involved somewhat with Congressman Conyers on what happened in Ohio during the last Presidential election. Conyers is the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, and he went up there with a bunch of researchers. They went from district to district, and they found out how the election was stolen. He wrote a report that was published by a small press in Chicago. To help out, I said I'd write a preface for him on how the election was stolen. We were thinking that might help. But The New York Times and The Washington Post were not going to review the book about how we had a second Presidential election stolen. They weren't going to admit it. A huge number of Americans still believe that Saddam Hussein was responsible for 9/11. You have a people that don't know anything about the rest of the world, and you have leaders who lie to them, lie to them, and lie to them. It's so stupid, everything that they say. And the media take on it just as stupid as theirs, sometimes worse. They at least have motives. They are making money out of the republic or what's left of it. It's the stupidity that will really drive me away from this country. When were the media better? They've never been much good. They belong to the people who own them. But they were better, the level was higher. There used to be foreign correspondents in other countries. There's nobody abroad now. The New York Times gave up being anything except a kind of shadow of The Wall Street Journal. The Washington Post is the court circular. What has the emperor done today? And who will be the under-assistant of the secretary of agriculture? As though these things mattered. What do you think of the public advertising of one's faith among political leaders? They make a show of going to church and participating in ceremonies. Personally I find it sickening, and very much against what our Founders had in mind. Remember that the country was mostly founded by Brits, and England's always gotten credit for having invented hypocrisy. So we are reflecting our British heritage when we hypocritically talk about how religious we are.

Is the US more like Sparta than Athens? We're not so good as either. We certainly are not warlike. Spartans were based upon military service. We don't want that. We want to make money, which I always thought was one of the most admirable things about Americans. We didn't want to go out and conquer other countries. We wanted to corner wheat in the stock market or something sensible like that. So we are very unbelligent. We were dragged screaming into World War I. Well, we were slightly enthusiastic about that, but we were very innocent farm people in those days. In World War II, we fought to stay out of that war. And every liberal figure in the United States from Norman Thomas on was anti-war. They were isolationists in the old populist tradition. So we never had a chance of being Sparta. Talk about the role of the opposition party, the Democrats. It isn't an opposition party. I have been saying for the last thousand years that the United States has only one party -- the property party. It's the party of big corporations, the party of money. It has two right wings; one is Democrat and the other is Republican. What can people do to energize democracy? The tactic would be to go after smaller offices, state by state, school board, sheriff, state legislatures. You can turn them around and that doesn't take much of anything. Take back everything at the grassroots, starting with state legislatures. That's what Madison always said. I'd like to see a revival of state legislatures, in which I am a true Jeffersonian. Do you see any developments on the horizon that might suggest an alternative? Newton's Third Law. I hope that law is still working. American laws don't work, but at least the laws of physics might work. And the Third Law is: There is no action without reaction. There should be a great deal of reaction to the total incompetence of this Administration. It's going to take two or three generations to recover what we had as of twenty years ago.

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(c) The Progressive

Railroad(ed) to death: The China-Tibet train

VINAY LAL

WITH the inauguration on July 1 by Chinese President Hu Jintao of the New Tibet railway which links Golmud to Lhasa, the assimilation of the "Tibetan Autonomous Region," as Tibet is known in the Orwellian world of Chinese officialdom, into the burgeoning Chinese empire may now be described as having reached the ominous point of no return. No one, except perhaps the most devoted advocates of Tibetan independence, will think of comparing this railway line across "the roof of the world" to the notorious "Death Railway" that most people became aware of through David Lean's film, "The Bridge on the River Kwai" -- and yet, as shall perhaps become clear, this may be the most aptest comparison at this triumphant moment for the Chinese. As the Japanese military pushed its way across South-East Asia and sought entry into India, it commandeered a huge labour force of nearly 275,000 men, comprised largely of conscripted Asian workers and allied POWs, to build a railway line from Bangkok to Burma. Working under the most wretched conditions, nearly 100,000 men succumbed to starvation, malnutrition, fatigue from backbreaking labour, cruel punishment, and diseases such as dysentery, cholera, and malaria. We have a nearly exact tally of the number of British, Australian, Dutch, and American fatalities -- 6,318; 2,815; 2,490; and 131 respectively -- but the Japanese, who are scarcely alone in construing European lives as more worthy than those of miserable Indians, Thais, Koreans, and Burmese, didn't even bother to count the dead among Asians, some 80,000 of whom are now estimated to have died in less than a year. The present China-Tibet railway line appears, at first glance, to present a study in contrast. The Chinese narrative about this accomplishment, at least, is unequivocally clear, and the world seems eager to embrace it. By all accounts, this train line across extraordinarily difficult and beautiful terrain is an "engineering marvel," and the Chinese have

been voluble in voicing their opinion that it heralds a new chapter in world railroad history. The latest stretch of the Qinghai-Tibet railroad, from Golmud to Lhasa some 1,142 kms away, is largely 4,000 meters or more above sea level, and at 5,072 meters it reaches the highest point of the journey. Oxygen is pumped into cabins to prevent, or alleviate the distress of, altitude sickness; the windows have been equipped with ultra-violet filters to keep out the sun's glare, and a liquid coolant has been added along various stretches to ensure that the permafrost does not melt and thus endanger the structural foundations of the tracks. The official Chinese news agency has released reports which furnish those tidbits that habitually enthral people interested in world records, and among edifying facts it emerges that a record 550 kms of the tracks run on frozen earth and that, at 5,068 meters above sea level, the Tanggula Railway Station is now the highest railway station in the world. Railway buffs who salivate at the prospect of exciting tunnel rides can, at 4,905 meters above sea level, travel through the world's most elevated tunnel, the Fenguoshan, on frozen earth, and at 1,668 meters the Kunlun Mountain Tunnel now becomes the world's longest tunnel on frozen earth. One should not, consequently, be surprised that the Qinghai-Tibet railroad has been described in glowing terms as an object lesson for Western engineers who remained skeptical about the viability of the project, and as a stunning instantiation of China's rapid emergence as a world power. Much has been made of the economic rivalry, expected to grow exponentially over the next two decades, between India and China, but at least one Indian magazine, Business Standard, was able to put aside nationalist pride in calling upon Indians to consider that "China's public miracles," including the China-Tibet railroad and the gargantuan Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze, suggest "engineering expertise and project management ability on an awesome scale. The Konkan railway and the Sardar Sarovar dam are simply not in the same league." The magazine notes that the railway line being laid to Srinagar, which has enjoyed its

share of encomiums as a paradise on earth, barely reaches a third of the height scaled by the new train to China. Before the train's inaugural run, President Hu, a trained engineer, who also oversaw with his customary efficiency the administration of a martial law regime in Tibet when pro-democracy demonstrations broke out in 1989, described how the world's highest railway fulfilled a long-cherished dream of the Chinese people, and the miraculous enactment of the promise to bring the fruits of socialist modernization to Tibetans and so bring them into the orbit of the civilized world of the global economy. In all these accounts, and countless other similar ones that will continue to emerge in the near future, the story of the China-Tibet railway is writ large in one word: "development." The argument was put rather more elegantly by historian William Everdell, who has written that we "call 'modern' everything that happened to any other culture after it had built its first railroads." If Hu and the global corps of cheerleaders from the business, media, and political worlds are to be believed, with the arrival of the train into Lhasa from China, Tibet, itself, has finally arrived into history. We might expect, of course, Chinese officials, and the functionaries who run the state media, to celebrate the Qinghai-Tibet railroad as the culmination of the attempts to end Tibet's isolation from the world and bring development to a people who had been compelled to live under the yoke of a feudal society. The unimpeachable argument that Chinese repression has wrought untold havoc on the Tibetans, leading to the death and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands, exile for just as many more in India where the Dalai Lama has constituted his government in exile, and the deliberate destruction of monasteries and other manifestations of Tibetan culture evokes little sympathy among those who, whether in China or elsewhere in the world, accept that the modernization of a people and its economy are indispensable social gains that we must strive to achieve even if the fulfillment of this ambition entails the sacrifice of a people and the loss of their culture. Those who speak on behalf of

the Tibetans are dismissed as "romantics" or as hypocrites who, while availing themselves of all the comforts and technologies of the modern world, would deny the same privileges to a people held captive by a feudal theocracy. The Chinese are now only prepared to tolerate criticism that is offered from within the framework of modernity, which explains why, in building the railroad, they have been unusually sensitive to environmental considerations. Official news releases state that the railroad cars have been installed with environmental-friendly toilets, and are equipped with wastewater deposit tanks and garbage disposal facilities. Underpasses have been created to prevent antelopes and other animals from coming on to the tracks. All of this is a piece with the safeguards put into place by the Environmental Protection Bureau, which is among the most active of state agencies in Tibet. Plastic bags are banned in Lhasa, and the government has shut down industrial units that do not meet environmental guidelines. The environment is now sacrosanct, but people must remain expendable. Ever so keen to offer Tibet to the world as an illustration of the salubrious effects of the cleansing of feudalism, the Chinese have continued apace with the ethnic cleansing of Tibet. Once a land has been emptied of its people it must be "repopulated," and among the slightly lesser known consequences of the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese is the immense population transfers that have resulted in the Tibetans becoming a minority in their own country. Han Chinese are now the dominant ethnic group in Tibet, and already by 1996 they outnumbered Tibetans in Lhasa by 2:1. It is now 46 years since China invaded and occupied Tibet, and the Chinese have come to understand, bolstered in recent years by their growing economic strength, that they can act with utter impunity. The ideologues of development, one might say, have embraced a like view. When the blow must be softened, development's hardened advocates will speak of "development with a human face," "sustainable" development, "shared" development, "alternative" development, but no one will speak of alternatives to

development. We have come to the stage where development's particular contours are hotly disputed, but it is understood that the framework itself must not be abandoned. Mao's "Great Leap Forward" spelled death for 25-30 million Chinese, victims of ruinous economic policies and grandiose plans of social engineering, and it is prudent to ask what forms death will take in this next phase of China's aggressive march to the tune of modernity. Chinese actions are calculated to render Tibetans strangers in their own land, but there are many other, equally critical, forms of estrangement. Is it really necessary that every part of the world be absorbed into the orbit of the world economy, and is it necessary that every place be judged against some imagined plateau of modern civilization? Will Tibet's absorption into new tourist circuits be as beneficial to its own people as it will be to tourists? And just what does "beneficial" mean? On whose terms will the Tibetans be brought into the global conversations, perfunctory as they may be, that are presently taking place among those who count themselves as citizens of the world? China and Tibet are now "connected," but what kind of exchanges are likely to take place between the two? Henry David Thoreau, one might surmise, understood the profound irony of technological blessings: as he wrote in Walden (1854): "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate." Some conversations and communications cannot take place except under conditions of extreme disparity, and among the most fundamental rights, one that is seldom recognized, is the right of a people to forgo exchanges and conversations that can only render them more vulnerable to dominant worldviews, lifestyles, and cultural norms. There is now a railroad from China to Tibet; and one can only hope against hope that the Tibetans will not be railroaded to their extinction.

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Digital Bangladesh

ZIAUR RAHMAN

EACH day for Bangladesh should be part of a well-crafted national strategy, but the point is, who is there to make this strategy? More pertinently, will the masses buy into this grandiose plan of action? It is hard to tell, but many efforts dot the Bangladeshi landscape for coming to a common platform on which to sketch our collective future. In despair of the fact that truth and justice seem to have fallen into a bad state in Bangladesh due to bitter political rivalry and ineffective judicial systems. Absence of good governance and lack of political will have played their nasty roles for sure. Chiming in with all other citizens, I also maintain that the justice department and the policing agencies in Bangladesh need massive reorganization for ensuring more transparency and scrutiny, otherwise unresolved cases will never see the light of day. In Bangladesh, the catchword "governance" is being used widely in seminars and symposia and with no end to the rhetoric, but action is lacking. Some changes, however, do take place, but, sadly, too slowly. We look forward to more meaningful changes. First and foremost, we need to set the bureaucracy under an e-governance initiative, with a transparent file tracking system that the public can access. This will, right away, reduce corruption, because everyone involved in the process can be tracked down. When I heard of a case that had been put on hold for more than four years, the possibility of digital governance dawned on me. Why shouldn't the justice department be under the purview of digital governance? Why should the people of Bangladesh be always in the dark and not know if the case has been running without any interference? Can we not introduce a semblance of order in this field, and in many others, through ICT enabled governance parameters? Why should we not get the parliament under the jurisdiction of digital governance also? Can the city corporations and semi-government institutions not be made transparent through digital governance? Why not get all the land transfer and recording sys-

tems on a similar platform? We can and we must do so. We talk of ICT revolution, but why can we not use ICT to get our house straight? Many foreign governments have moved on to e-governance. Why shouldn't we? Yes, I do understand that it is an expensive and time-consuming endeavor, but let us have more responsible parliamentarians who would rise above sectarian politics and petty bickering and set a plan of action that they would share during their campaigning period so that the public can hold them accountable and judge their achievements and failures before bringing them back to power. The parties need to put forth similar efforts and be judged accordingly. The political parties need to introduce e-governance on internal issues as well. Let party people be allowed to vote on certain issues and let these systems be ICT enabled and transparent for all to view. These essential changes must be in place otherwise the entire democratic system in Bangladesh will ring hollow and politicians will not be able to raise the consciousness of the people. This will make democracy ineffective and put us on the slippery road to anarchy. Do we want that? Of course not. We want a healthy democracy where politics will bring back the glitter of the golden times when there were statesmen with far-reaching vision and who were rightly considered the guardians of the nation along with the intellectuals of the time. Do we honestly feel that way now? Should we not reverse the process and bring back the great institution called democracy with the help of people with vision, patience and unflinching objectivity? We live in a deeply divided society where BNP and Awami League are blowing their own horns without realizing what cacophony they are raising. Smart people with a vision for the nation are drawing away from politics, and political goons and thugs are taking center stage. This is painful for sensitive citizens like myself who feel that politics is rationality, understanding, and fellow feeling. Politics is about becoming a team player, keeping everyone connected so that none feels ostracized. Politics, driven by digital gover-

nance, needs to be the cornerstone strategy for Bangladesh and all other countries. We cannot, anymore, be pawns moving at the whims of the politicians. The country is not the private property of any seasoned politician, but the right is equally shared. So let us reduce the obstacles to people's participation and rights by vigorously introducing e-governance initiatives in all walks of life. Unfortunately, politics in Bangladesh sadly bemoans a conflict-ridden ride to glory at the cost of economic dislocation and innocent lives. Change is needed and change is inevitable. I think part of the change can come from pressure groups of Bangladeshi citizens living abroad who can push the government machinery to introduce digital governance. They can also volunteer their time and energy to designing an effective digital governance platform and then let the government, public-private partnerships or citizens' groups improve upon it over time. With 150 or more Bangladeshi associations across the globe, a strong force can be organized to set the political landscape in order. I am not saying that it should be a formal or informal intervention, but these groups can try to sway the decisions of the politicians, bureaucrats, and citizens of Bangladesh to objectively seek out our positions on case-by-case issue, while keeping away from political patronization. A voting system needs to be introduced for Bangladeshis living abroad. In an effort to extend the benefits of digital governance, voting can be placed on the net, allowing citizens of Bangladesh to vote with unique keys assigned to them against their passports. We can start by selecting cities overseas where large numbers of Bangladeshis reside. I thank all of you who have been thinking about improving the lot of Bangladeshi citizens through digital governance, and laboring to put justice and peace back in their rightful places. With pride, commitment, and, above all, a feeling for our people and our martyrs, let us collectively effect positive changes in Bangladesh. Zaur Rahman is CEO, International Institute of Technology & Management.