

Words of wisdom that could be

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HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

WHEN President Barack Obama entered the White House after his historic inauguration as the 44th president of the United States of America he discovered a letter from the outgoing president George W. Bush waiting for him at the Oval Office.

This tradition was started in the 1980s. In 1987, when Ronald Reagan left the White House, he left a letter for his successor George H. W. Bush -- creating a new tradition. H.W. followed the tradition by leaving a letter for William Jefferson Clinton.

Mr. Clinton, in turn, left a letter for Mr. George W. Bush. Following this tradition, George W. left a letter with a yellow sticker marked 44 on the envelop for President Barack Obama. No one knows the contents of that letter, which the new president read on the morning of January 21.

One can speculate that the letter may have good wishes, some reflections and some advice -- such as, "never believe in weapons of mass destruction."

Or, who knows, maybe some trivia: "the booze is in the lower drawer," or the "flush of the toilet does not always work" or whatever. I leave that to the US political pundits to work out.

Here I want to speculate on what kind of letter former prime minister Khaleda Zia would have left for incoming Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Let me also assume that Mrs. Zia would share her reflections honestly and with utter candour.

Dear Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, First, let me congratulate you on winning a landmark election, which my partymen say was not fair. But be that as it may, I want to share my reflections with you on what went wrong during my administration and would like to leave some advice for

your administration.

I was complacent after an overwhelming victory. I thought I was invincible. My popularity would never decline. I was wrong.

I rewarded some civil servants who helped me win the election with fast-track promotions. This was not a good idea as it alienated the civil service.

I tried to weed out all officers from various branches of the administration who had even the remotest connection with the Awami League. Just to give one example, I sidelined a promising officer from one of the branches of the military when I was told that the wife of that officer was distantly related by marriage to Awami League leader Zillur Rahman. Trust me, I had superb intelligence on matters like these.

Politicisation of the civil service was not a good idea. Especially, politicisation of the judiciary created a lot of mistrust between the civil society and my administration. It was difficult to claim that people would reelect me because of my successful leadership and then try to make sure that a judge favourable to my administration, or a chief election officer with unquestionable loyalty to BNP, or pro-BNP people would man the Anti-corruption

Commission to help us get re-elected.

Please do not try to deny that there is terrorism in Bangladesh. I found myself entangled with the religious right and had to overlook religious extremism. My administration was even foolish enough to try to deny the existence of Bangla Bhai and others who some of my cabinet colleagues claimed were creations of Awami League supported media even when their activities were widely reported in local and international media and when bombs were blasting all around the country. Later, I had to eat humble pie when my administration arrested him.

When your political rally was bombed and you were targeted for assassination, my party leaders claimed that that was an internal feud and, rather than trying to investigate the crime, my law enforcing departments discovered some guy called George Mia and accused him of a crime he did not commit. In fact, this drama contradicted the BNP line that the bomb attack on Awami League rally on August 20, 2004 was an internal Awami League matter. My senior party colleagues made similar accusations -- that these were due to internal feuds -- when Ahsanullah Master MP of Awami League and the former finance minis-



Speaking from experience.

ter ASMS Kibria were assassinated. Never deny the rise of prices of essential commodities reported in the mainstream media by saying those were media-created.

Never say unnotir joar (the high tide of development) even if the economy is buoyant. I found out, to my dismay, that the talk of joar (high tide) brings bhata (low-ebb) of popularity and sky-rocketing of prices.

The stories of corruption in my administration came to me but I was in denial and not ready to listen because I was blinded by affection of my children and close relatives. So do not allow your children or close relatives to oversee business transactions.

Never let your children set up another Bhavan or a parallel administration. Thank You. KZ.

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The steep price of secrecy

The president has a right to private meetings, but, in the spirit of transparency, he shouldn't get too upset when details inevitably leak. And there's no point growing irritated, as he did last week, when reporters use any chance they get to ask him some tough questions.

JONATHAN ALTER

FOR a long time now, there's been too much secrecy in this city. Those were the most important words President Obama spoke on his first full day in office. Obama then signed executive orders to shift the balance back toward openness in government. At least in theory, the burden of proof will move from those who would release information to those who would classify it.

It's significant Obama led off this way. He went right after not just George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, but an eternal bureaucratic impulse. Will Obama's emphasis on discipline and control eventually lead him to share that impulse? We'll see.

Thomas Jefferson argued that "information is the currency of democracy," and for generations peacetime America respected the principle. Believing, as Secretary of State Henry Stimson did, that "gentlemen don't read other gentlemen's mail," the nation chose not to even have an intelligence service until World War II. Then came the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 and the National Security Act of 1947, which essentially said that a certain constantly expanding category of information was "born classified." That means no formal process for assessing if something

should be secret or not -- just an officious bureaucrat with a big stamp.

The Cold War created a national-security state that we now assume to be normal. Occasionally, the value of openness asserts itself, only to be crushed by fear. President Johnson's 1966 Freedom of Information Act and declassification efforts by Presidents Carter and Clinton were severely curtailed by Bush after 9/11. To protect former presidents (including, not coincidentally, his father and himself), Bush gave the ex men the power to keep their records secret after leaving office. This attack on the very idea of honest history was also reversed by Obama's executive order.

Obama's angular left-handed signature on an order won't transform the bureaucracy overnight. Every agency of government is afflicted with the secrecy disease. George Washington University's National Security Archive, currently suing for access to 5 million Bush administration e-mails, hands out an annual "Rosemary Award," which is named for President Nixon's secretary, Rose Mary Woods, who notoriously erased 18 and a half minutes from a crucial Watergate tape.

The award is for the worst responsiveness to FOIA requests. Last year it went to the Treasury Department, which seems to

work overtime stalling efforts to release information. That must change soon or we'll never learn the details of how the government spent \$700 billion in a few months trying to bail out the banks.

Rational people agree that vital national-security details (i.e., sources and methods of intelligence-gathering) need to be kept secret. But the 9/11 Commission reported that 75% of what was classified about Osama bin Laden should not have been, and by some estimates as much as 90% of secret material wouldn't hurt national security if posted online tomorrow.

In fact, it would likely help. The late senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan argued that secrecy isn't just antidemocratic, it's stupid. It impedes wise decision making because what's not known can't be widely debated. That by definition reduces options.

Moynihan wrote that secrecy, rather than Jefferson's information, has become the currency of government, as agencies hoard everything they can. This creates scarcity, which makes secrets "organizational assets" to be traded in a closed market of officials, with the same harmful consequences of any closed market.

Then there are cultural factors. Dealing with classified material makes officials feel important, as if the sacrifice of taking a lower-paying government job can be partly compensated for by the frisson of handling something secret. And they worry that were they to err on the side of openness and declassification, they'll get in trouble with their bosses. If Obama's new policy is to succeed, these same officials will have to fear facing penalties for



Curing the "secrecy disease."

not declassifying documents and making them available posthaste.

Many government agencies still use 1980s computers, and presidential libraries require a tech upgrade, too. Thomas Blanton of the National Security Archive reports that George H.W. Bush's staff

produced a few hundred thousand e-mails; Bill Clinton's generated about 32 million; and George W. Bush's, more than 100 million. Swamped historians will need to apply clever use of keywords to glean anything significant.

The Internet offers new ways to see

openness as a huge money saver. As a senator, Obama won approval of a "Google for government" bill that requires the posting of a brief description of federal contracts. He should now go further and mandate PDFs of all contracts with the private sector.

The yelps of these companies living off the federal teat must be ignored; when competitors see the contracts, they'll race to convince the government they can do the same things cheaper.

In the White House, Obama and reporters are already sparring about what is properly confidential. It was hardly a blow to the republic that the meaningless oath do-over wasn't televised. But true transparency requires getting rid of unaccountable Washington traditions like referring to background briefers as "senior government officials" when everyone in town knows their identities (Press Secretary Robert Gibbs inadvertently conveyed the name of one, White House counsel Greg Craig, in his first news conference).

The president has a right to private meetings, but, in the spirit of transparency, he shouldn't get too upset when details inevitably leak. And there's no point growing irritated, as he did last week, when reporters use any chance they get to ask him some tough questions.

Stories of secrets and espionage have long been cool in Washington lore. Openness was for geeky goo-goos. But now a hip new president says it's time to "make government as honest and transparent as it needs to be." He might have added a line from Pat Moynihan: "Secrecy is for losers."

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The case of the Alaei brothers

The Alaei brothers were detained in June 2008 after allegations that they had held conferences to recruit volunteers who would later be mobilised abroad to be trained in conducting a "velvet revolution."

ALI SHEIKHOLESLAMI

AFTER six months of detention and interrogation, Tehran's Revolutionary Court convicted the Alaei brothers for what has been called "designing a velvet revolution to overthrow the Iranian regime," BBC

reported.

Arash Alaei will be jailed for 6 years, while his brother Kamyar will spend 3 years in the famous Evin Prison in Tehran, although they have denied all allegations.

Arash and Kamyar Alaei are world-renowned HIV/Aids physicians who

have been active for over 20 years to introduce and provide treatment and prevention measures. They have carried out several projects and, since 1998, they have focused on harm reduction programs for injecting drug addicts.

They have also trained Tajik and Afghan doctors as a part of their attempt to encourage regional cooperation in countering HIV/Aids. According to Human Rights Watch "their efforts expanded the expertise of doctors in the region, advanced the progress of medical science, and earned Iran recognition as a model of best practice by the World Health Organisation."

Masoud Shafaei, lawyer to the Alaei

brothers, told BBC Persian that the verdict was given to him on January 20, and added that he would "appeal for the defendants in due course."

The Alaei brothers were detained in June 2008 after allegations that they had held conferences to recruit volunteers who would later be mobilised abroad to be trained in conducting a "velvet revolution."

An Iranian counter-intelligence official said in a press conference on Monday that the confessions of the members of a network "designing a velvet revolution" would be soon broadcast on the state television.

For a long time, the largest share of

HIV/Aids spread in Iran was blamed on injecting addicts. However, the Iranian health minister last month announced that "dangerous sexual behaviour" had become a major cause in spreading the fatal disease.

Official figures in Iran suggest that about 18,000 patients carry the virus, a number that is thought to be only the tip of an iceberg. The Ministry of Health publishes these statistics every three months, and in their latest they highlighted that most of the infected belonged to the age range of 25 to 34, while over 93% of them were men.

Sexual education before university is still taboo in Iran. The officials are worried

that the conservative section of the society would be offended if sexuality was mentioned in the media. There are no adverts for condoms, and any trace of cleavage or bare skin is censored from films.

The European Union called on Iran in August to release the Alaei brothers. Earlier, in June, Physicians for Human Rights sent a letter to the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and asked him to free the two doctors. On January 13, the Human Rights Watch called on Iran to "acquit HIV/Aids doctors prosecuted in unfair trial."

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Y kant we spel english werds rite?



NURY VITTACHI

THE Hong Kong Government is reintroducing English-medium teaching to hundreds of schools. Every place I've lived in, including Sri

Lanka and Malaysia, has regular heated debates on whether Asian kids should be taught in English.

The problem is this: English is the world's most useful language, but also the most idiotic.

This becomes clear whenever I try to correct my youngest daughter's spelling. "Knee starts with k," I say. "And right has a gin in the middle."

"Why?" she replies. "That is SO dumb." Why? I had to agree with her. It is so dumb.

A bit of research showed that the finest brains in history agreed, too. Nineteenth century playwright George Bernard Shaw tried for years to force people to spell words as they sounded.

He would have thoroughly approved of my daughter, who does this all the time.

"Dea Dad. Pliz bi me a pakit of grin tinsul bcoz we nid it for kwyer on tyuz da," said a reminder note she wrote for me once. That was an easy one.

Some are a little harder. She wrote an extra-long Christmas list, which took half an hour to work out. (I decided to trans-

late it to save Santa the job.) She wanted:

- Bah bee stuf;
- Aponi;
- Joolry;
- Agam boy;
- Rola bladz with nee padz and Lbo padz;
- Acompoota;
- Ahamsta.
- And so on.

I was moaning about this at a gathering of elite intellectuals, okay, a bar, when a guy told me that the answer was for all of us to switch to speaking Bulgarian.

This is not as odd an idea as it seems. Bulgarian is apparently the only language in the world where everything is written EXACTLY as it sounds. As a result, speakers can learn to read and write in minutes.

"Make a bulk order of Teach Yourself Bulgarian and you can instantly create a multi-lingual family," he said.

Because I am prudent ("stingy") when it comes to spending money, I did a bit more research. I discovered that the vocabulary appears to cater exclusively for Bulgarian interests, which consists of consuming vinegar bean soup and becoming madly intoxicated on Bulgarian spirits. Not a lot of call for this in my daughter's social circles. Maybe when she reaches her teens.

Someone else suggested we learn Lojban. This is a phonetic language using words drawn equally from six of the world's biggest languages: English, Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi and Russian. The creators have published books and articles in the language.

Unfortunately no one can read them. We can all read the odd word here and there (they use "mi" for "me" for example) but no one can read a whole sentence.

Surely somebody somewhere must be doing something to make the English language less ludicrous? Is there no worldwide movement to fix it?

I sat down at the computer to do some research. But my older daughter had left her "instant message" function on the screen, and I started to get lots of messages from her friends in little boxes mid-screen.

"RU home?" said one. "Hav u dun yr math hmwk?" said another.

"Any1 logd on?" said a third. Yes. There it was. Internet slang: unimaginably vast amounts of text, and almost every word was written in clear, simple, phonetic English.

George Bernard Shaw would have loved it.

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