

A Fable for Our Times

It was over half a century ago that I first read Cervantes' marvelous novel, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. I was then studying at the University of Chile, trying to learn Spanish, and *Don Quixote* was the first novel I remember reading. Or, to be honest, "reading at" because my Spanish was still weak and the text is full of unfamiliar expressions. Also, I was very young and did not know enough about the world to understand fully what Cervantes was saying. But, he had a remarkable gift of writing on different levels. His tale could be enjoyed as just a good story or more profoundly. So, despite my shortcomings, he caught me in his magical web. A few years later, somewhat better equipped, I dipped into *Don Quixote* again in a delightful course on satire I was taking as an undergraduate at Harvard.

So now I have gone back. Or not quite back. Not quite, because I now can put both of those early ventures into a new perspective from experiences I have had and observations I have made over the last half century. I now realize that what Cervantes wrote about his own times could be applied to ours. He was writing about themes that recur often and are particularly apposite today. Indeed, the auguries suggest that they may be virtually a prediction. His "Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote" can be read as an amalgam of several of our own "knights errant," and his accounts of his *hidalgo's* adventures foreshadowed some of the wilder forays into combat of our own warriors. A terrifying thought at least to me is that the hints and themes we can read into his story may be played out in the aftermath of the next election. So, laugh with Cervantes -- or shudder with me -- over a few pages of his fable.

He begins by anchoring us in place, *En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme*¹ ("in a place on the Plain whose name I don't wish to remember"). As I now transpose it to Washington D.C., he might have written, "at little town in Foggy Bottom whose name I don't wish to remember."

Then he introduces the target of his satire, Don Quixote: *no ha much tiempo que vivía un hidalgo de los de lanza en astillero, adarga antigua, rocín flaco y galgo corredor* ("not much time has passed since there lived one of those gentlemen of the sort who keeps a lance hanging on the wall, an ancient shield, a bony mare and a greyhound"),

At this point, one stops. Who in our times might fit such a description? Are there such eccentric would-be warriors holed up in government offices, think tanks or war colleges with the symbols of warfare and the hunt flaunted above their desks? A memory pops into my mind: yes, I remember when it was quite fashionable to festoon the walls of offices in the Executive Office Building, the old State and War Departments, of the White House, with the modern equivalents of Quixote's lance. Battle-scarred weapons fashioned by the Vietcong were particularly favored. Some of us even brought our hounds (but not our nags) into our offices. But in those far-off days, knights errant were few even in Foggy Bottom. Now, they seem to have multiplied beyond counting. So, could we single out anyone as our Don Quixote? Names of candidates flow past my inner eye. Indeed, even Cervantes puzzled over the name of his hero. He offers several alternatives.

We might do the same. The character we need to fit his story is an arm-chair warrior who is carried away by his occult reading to the point that he is prepared to embark (or at least to send others to embark) on great (and disastrous) adventures in far-away lands, and whose grip on reality is, like Don Quixotes, is, to say the least, faulty.

We have a legion of candidates who fit that bill. So it is hard to pick a single name.

Never mind. As Cervantes wrote, the name "matters little for our account; it is enough that the narrative does not depart a single point from the truth." (*esto importa poco a nuestro cuento; basta que en la narración dél no se salga un punto de la verdad.*) Being accurate or at least suggestive within reasonable bounds was very important for Cervantes and is also important for us because the tale we -- the combination of Cervantes classically and I in modern terms -- relate is hard to believe.

As I say, many of our great statesmen come to mind, but the richest lode is to be found in the neoconservative movement. Whoa! I pull on the reins of my imagination. Could Cervantes have imagined a Dick Cheney? A Paul Wolfowitz? One of the Kristols? Surely such figures are to be seen only in our times? Well, no. Not at all. History provides quite a few ancestors for them. However, as the text of the book makes clear, Cervantes' *hidalgo* was a complex character who not only read and fantasized but actually himself also went out and fought. Doing both narrows the field rather drastically. It is hard to find one of the great statesmen we read about, much less those we know in our times, who both proclaimed policy *and* themselves went into harm's way. In the "leisure of the theory class," as Veblen has been amended for our times, the armchair was found to be much more comfortable than the helicopter bucket seat. So, Cervantes would have had to invent a combination of something like Paul Wolfowitz and David Petraeus.

And, of course, he would have transposed Don Quixote's lance, shield, bony mare and greyhound. They don't quite do in our day. So consider our modern Don Quixote trading them in for a fighter-bomber, a Patriot missile system, an aircraft carrier and, although this may be stretching it even for Cervantes, a drone in place of the greyhound.

Never mind. Don't quibble about the tools of the trade. Cervantes, himself, was less concerned with the artifacts than with the mind of his hero. As he tells us, Don Quixote had read so many romantic tales about the glorious adventures of knights errant that "the poor fellow lost his reason to such an extent that not even Aristotle could have untangled the wild imaginations that he believed, were he to be brought back to life just to do that job." (*Con estas razones perdía el pobre caballero el juicio y desvelábase por entenderlas y desentrañarles el sentido que no se sacara ni las entendiera el mesmo Aristóteles, si resucitara para solo ella.*) To try to understand what all the writings were about and what they told him to do, Don Quixote talked with the learned priest of his village. Just so, our modern Don Quixote, having imbibed and partly understood the neoconservative bizarre view of human affairs, consulted with the High Priest of neoconservatism, Leo Strauss, who held forth in his "village" as the President of the University of Chicago once referred to its department of political science. But, as we shall see, Don Quixote chose a rather better guide than did our policy makers.

Cervantes was not kind about the writings of such philosophers. He shows his poor hero dazzled by the intricacies and blind alleys of the outpouring of his version of the great myth peddler. Cervantes has his spinner of tales, a man known as Feliciano de Silva, leading his avid but disoriented devoté into a maze with "clarity of the prose and intricacy of reasoning" exemplified by such marvels as "the reason of unreason affects my reason to such a degree that my reason withers away..." (*La razón de la sinrazón que a mi razón se hace, de tal maner, mi razón enflaquece...*) That is, put rather more prosaically, logic and facts cease to matter. It is the vision of romantic action against demonic forces that give the necessary energy for wild endeavors. Thought becomes a banner to signal the grand campaign. And, as Cervantes said, *razón enflaquece* ... "reason withers away."

Finally, as Cervantes tells us, his Don Quixote became so immersed in such readings that he passed the nights from dusk to dawn and the days from dawn to dusk "until finally the brain dried up and he came to lose his mind. Having filled himself with the fantasies he had read in de Silva's writings, imaginary happenings became actual for him [and] no other interpretation of the world was more real."²

"As a result, having lost his mind, he hit on the strangest plan that had ever occurred to a crazy person anywhere: it came to seem to him appropriate and necessary both to augment his own honor and to serve his republic to make himself a knight errant and take himself around the world with his weapons and on his mount to seek adventures and to put into practice all he had read... becoming a knight errant, going about the world with his arms and mount, seeking adventures, righting every manner of wrong and by putting himself in situations of great peril to make famous his name. The poor fellow imagined himself crowned for his valor, at the very least, with the empire of Trebizond; so with these agreeable thoughts in mind, he immediately set out to put into effect his plan."³

But he faced an immediate obstacle: having decided to venture into the dangerous world, Don Quixote realizes that he must be properly "entitled" -- that is, he could not afford to be seen as an outlaw or a war criminal but must be recognized as a person legally or at least officially entitled to engage in combat to overthrow and to kill the wicked. So he seeks someone to dub him a knight, which in contemporary terms would give him legitimacy. Just so, the neoconservatives realized that it was not enough simply to proclaim their doctrine in their journal even if that attracted to their cause real warriors who could put it into effect. Rather they must be vested with authority. Even intellectuals, after all, need to be "knighted" if they are to perform acts that when done unofficially or by ordinary citizens are crimes.

So, after an agonized delay in which he found no proper authority to knight him, Don Quixote comes upon an inn whose keeper emerges to welcome him. To our would-be knight errant the inn is a castle and the keeper is its lord just as *our* Don Quixote found his authority to be the lord of the White House. Cervantes has *his* Don Quixote say – and we can be sure that our Wolfowitz-Petraeus spoke similarly -- these magic words,

My adornments are my arms,
My leisure is to fight."⁴

Then, before the proprietor of the house, Don Quixote falls on his knees, saying "I will never raise myself from where I am, Illustrious Lord, until you have given me what I seek, that which will spread your fame and do good to all humanity... that I may go forth equipped with the necessary credentials as an armed knight such as never before was to be found in the world."⁵

One can only imagine how the modern bond was forged. However it was done, we know that our modern hero-to-be was welcomed into the "House" by its Great Lord who proceeded to anoint him with the signs of high office. Neither would have been put off by the earlier hero's expectations:

"Who could doubt that in the coming times, when my glorious deeds emerge in the light of true history...my brave deeds will deserve to be cast in bronze, carved in marble and painted on canvasses to be seen for all time. Ah you! Wise enchanter of the future! Whoever you may be. To you will fall the honor of chronicling my great crusade!"⁶

He also admonished the future historian not to forget his warhorse.

And so, in our marvelous age of instant history, it happened as predicted -- or requested. It was not long before that very chronicle appeared. Written not about Don Quixote, of course, but about his modern and only partial successor, Paul Wolfowitz, under the title *Visionary Intellectual, Policymaker and Strategist*. The author was so fulsome that he certainly did not forget the "warhorse," the great weapons of war.

Back to the Inn/Castle/White House, the keeper/lord/president mentions that although he had not read -- he was not noted for his reading-- the marvelous accounts that had so affected both the old and the new Don Quixotes, while still a young man he too had wandered the world, seeking adventures. In place of Seville, Malaga, Cordoba and Toledo, in the earlier account, read New Haven, Cambridge, Austin and Dallas -- and, after a number of shady enterprises, as we are told by Cervantes earlier and by the media in our times, they both had entered their "houses." Castle lords or not, they both were empowered to dub anyone a knight "or at least as much a knight as anyone in the world was." (*y tan caballero, que no pudeiese más en el mundo.*)

So empowered, Don Quixote sets out on his first venture, rushing to "regime change" a tyranny. It happened like this:

As Don Quixote was riding along, he heard moans coming from a forest he was passing. Looking for a cause for which to fight, he exclaimed "I give thanks to Heaven for giving me so soon a means to carry out my calling." With that, he rode into the forest where he saw a "stout rustic" lashing a poor boy. Don Quixote exploded in anger and, thinking that the rustic was a knight, challenged him to a fight. The peasant tried to excuse himself by saying that the boy had been stealing from him and was not protecting his sheep. And "he says I am a miser who does not want to pay him what I owe him."

Furious, our hero threatens the tyrant with his lance and orders him to pay the boy at once or "if not, by The God, I will make an end to you." (*Pagadle luego sín más*)

réplica; si no, por el Dios que nos rige que os concluya y aniquile en este punto. Desatadlo luego.)

So it happened also that when our modern heroes rode through the deserts of the Middle East, they saw a robust fellow (Iraq) mistreating a little fellow (Kuwait). When our heroes accosted him, the big fellow said that the little fellow was stealing his oil and not helping him protect his flock (the Arab nations) from the advancing Iranians. So Iraq, who had no money “with him” as Cervantes says of the lout Don Quixote encountered, said he could not pay Kuwait what it owed it.

In Cervantes' tale: the bully said he would take the little boy under his control and promised eventually to pay him the money. The boy was terrified and said that he would never trust the bully. But Don Quixote brushed his worries aside and said that he had given orders, which the peasant would obey. The boy need not worry; all would be well. And, if the peasant did not pay, he, Don Quixote would return and punish him.

Waiting until the valiant knight was out of sight, the peasant then tied the boy again to the tree and lashed him nearly to death.

So what happened in the story as it unfolded in our times? Our replacement of the peasant, the dictator of Iraq, consulted with the American ambassador who told him that we really took no position on what happened to the boy, Kuwait. The Americans apparently meant that the Saddam Husain should be allowed a little “beating” of Kuwait, but not too much. Saddam took that to give him permission, a “green light,” as America had flashed to another dictator in far-off Indonesia. So he grabbed Kuwait. The Americans were surprised by the ferocity of the attack because they thought he would not take *all* of the country. That is, not beat the “boy” nearly to death, as Cervantes' rustic set about doing.

"And in this manner," wrote Cervantes, "the valorous Don Quixote righted the wrong, being very happy that everything turned out so well according to the high ideals of knighthood." Wisely, Cervantes had his hero ride happily away. It was not so, as we know, in the modern version. Infuriated that Saddam went too far, the Americans returned to punish him. Then, having announced that they had imposed the high ideals of democracy, literally at the point of the lance, our modern heroes stayed on at the house of the cruel peasant, tore it apart and killed many of his family. They are still there. As Cervantes makes clear and as we know from experience not only in Iraq but in a string of other countries, the intervention of the great warrior resulted in the total breakdown of social institutions, security, justice and protection of the weak.

Cervantes could not have imagined how many times and in how many places his parable would be reenacted! But already, he realized that “regime change” gives birth to chaos and misery.

When Don Quixote finally got back to his own house, having been severely beaten in another encounter on the way, his friends decided that it would be an act of mercy to demolish the fantasies that had driven him mad and had nearly gotten him killed. The great man's housekeeper thought that all that was necessary was to sprinkle Holy Water on the books in his library, but his friends thought that the ridiculous

doctrine could be erased only by sterner action. They were too late. He was already infected by the ideas he had imbibed.

I leave it to the reader to draw the modern parallel. Is it too late for us and our valiant leaders to realize how pernicious are the delusions they have imbed, how many lives they have cost, how much treasure they have wasted? We cannot be sure, but the trends are against us. Suffice it to say that the neoconservatives are again plugging their dangerous policies and myopic views of cultures and societies and urging more mummery despite the record of their past malpractice. Behind the buzzwords of counterinsurgency and “nation building,” they caused and then justified not only the great harm done to those who stood in their way but also violations of those principles that have guided our democracy. Cervantes catches this violation neatly. Since one of the books Don Quixote had been reading was called *The Knight of the Cross*, Cervantes has the village priest remark that “behind the cross stands the devil.” (*mas también se suele decir, "tras la cruz está el diablo.*) Or, as we might transpose it to modern terms, behind the philosophical musings of Leo Strauss lurk the violent warmongering of the neoconservatives and the justifications for the rise of the “security state.” These collections were both pernicious, but undoubtedly the results of the impact of Strauss was far worse. They directly harmful to our liberty and well-being.

It is here where Cervantes introduces Sancho Panza whom some readers find to be an even more complex character than the great knight himself. Often a man of good sense, sometimes even noble and generous, he was also greedy and inconsistent. He was fair game for Don Quixote, and our wild warrior quickly brought Sancho into his court. Who was he?

As Cervantes describes him, he was "a working man, living nearby, a good man (if such a title could be given to a poor man) but not very bright; so after inveigling him with (soothing) words and (lavish) promises, he got the poor hick to agree to go with him and serve him as his squire. Among other things Don Quixote argued was that he ought to be willing to go along because, if their venture succeeded, they would win some island of which he would become governor. With these promises and others, Sancho Panza, although himself a simple working man, gave up his fields, left his wife and children and signed on as squire."⁷

It is hard to avoid reading Barack Obama into the character of Sancho. Having listened to the brave words of the neoconservatives, Obama and many members of Jefferson's, Jackson's and Roosevelt's Party of "the common man," the Democrats, readily gave up their customary fields of concern, the well-being of their families and fellow citizens, said goodbye to their long-time partners and rushed off as followers of the new doctrine in pursuit some distant “island” where they could win both laurels and emoluments. As they rode along together, Sancho (here the opportunistic Democrat) assured Don Quixote (here the Obama convert to Bush's policies) that "if you give me that island you promised, I will rule it, no matter how big it is."

But, as I have said, Sancho was a complex figure and another part of his personality – his innate common sense -- comes out in the most famous of the great knight's misadventures, the attack on the windmills.

As Cervantes tells the story, the great knight suddenly sighted some windmills and turning to his newly commissioned acolyte said, "luck has brought us even more than we could have desired; for there you see, Friend Sancho Panza, revealed before you 30 or a few more vicious giants with whom I think to do battle, deprive them of their lives [and] with whose spoils we will begin to enrich ourselves for this is a just war and is a great service to God to drive such vile species from the Earth."

An astonished Sancho, blurted out, "What giants?"

"Those you see before you," replied Don Quixote. "those with the long arms..."

"Look, Your Excellency," Sancho replied, what you see there are not giants, only windmills and what seems to be long arms are just wings to catch the wind and make the millstone turn."

"It is clear," continued Don Quixote, that you do not understand such matters. Those are giants. And if you are fainthearted, stand aside and say your prayers while I engage them in fierce and unequal battle."

With that the valiant knight spurred his horse into battle.⁸

We all have heard the story of what happened next: the windmill's wings caught the knight's lance, pulled him and his horse into the air and smashed them onto the ground. And, as Cervantes tells us, he was particularly grieved over the breaking of his lance.

To convert Cervantes to our times, imagine, I ask you, that the windmill was the little perceived, simple and otherwise engaged country of Afghanistan. Without much thought of the danger or the cost and no perceived consideration of alternative actions, we charged in and like him were caught in the whirling melee of its fiercely independent people. Don Quixote was, of course, suffering from delusion, but his action was unprecedented; we, in contrast, whether mad or not, had ample warnings from the experiences of the British and the Russians. Both the British and the Russians had lost their armies and their "lances" jousting Afghanistan's "windmills." Our Don Quixote, now multiplied by tens of thousands, paid a heavy price both for knowing no history and for having believed the wild dogmas of the neoconservatives.

Could this painful venture -- and all our other escapades in Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq, Libya (and now perhaps Syria and even the Ukraine) have been avoided? An attempt to answer that question takes us back to Sancho Panza. Sancho was a realist and tried to dissuade the knight errant from some of his dementia, but he -- like modern Democrats -- also sought to profit from them. Recognizing his venality, Don Quixote promised him a kingdom if he obeyed. In our times, the "kingdom" is not a far-away and imaginary island but victory at the polls, promotions and even the forges of "lances." These rewards come about more easily and quicker from sound and fury than from careful and constructive action. Cervantes got it right. Don Quixote's flights of madness are addictive. Eventually, even Sancho was converted. And today, as we see almost daily the Obama administration has taken over the major aspects of the neoconservative

creed. Looking to a future of the probable choice between a Hilary Clinton and a Jeb Bush, who will have the will to call a halt to madness?

Cervantes speaks to us all.

William R. Polk
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¹ To assure the reader that I have neither made up nor embroidered my account, I give the words as Cervantes wrote them.

² *se le secó el cerebro de manera que vino a perder el juicio. Llenósele la fantasía de todo aquello que leía en los libros...en la imaginación que era verdad [y] que para él no había otra historia más cierta en el mundo.*

³ *En efecto, rematado ya su juicio, vino a dar en el más extraño pensamiento que jamás dio loco en el mundo, y fue que le pareció conveniente y necesario, así para aumento de su honra como para el servicio de su república, hacerse caballero andante, e irse por todo el mundo con sus armas y caballo a buscar las aventuras y a ejercitarse en todo aquello que él había leído que los caballeros andantes se ejercitaban, deshaciendo todo género de agravio, poniéndose en ocasiones y peligros donde, acabados, cobrase eterno nombre y fama. Imaginábase el pobre y coronado por su valor de su brazo, por lo menos, del imperio de Trapisonda; y así con estos tan agradables pensamientos, llevado de extraño gusto que en ellos sentellos sentía, se dio prisa a poner en efecto los que deseaba.*

⁴ *mis arreos son la armas
mi descáanso el pelear*

⁵ *No me levantaré jamás de donde estoy, valeroso caballero, fasta que la vuestra cortesía me otorgue un don que pedirle quiero, el cual redundará en albanza vuestra y en pro del género humano...se harían las debidas ceremonias, de manera que él quedase armado caballero, y tan caballero, que no pudiese ser más en el mundo.*

⁶ *¿Quién duda sino que en los venideros tiempos, cuando salga a luz la verdadera historia de mis famosos hechos, que el sabio que los escribiere no ponga, cuando llegue a contar esta mi primera salida...las famosas hazañas mías, dignas de entallarse en bronce, esculpirse en mármol y pintarse en tablas, para memoria en lo futuro.. ¡Oh tú, sabio encantador, quienquiera que seas, a quien ha de tocar el ser coronista desta peregrina historia...*

⁷ *...un labrador vecino suyo, hombre de bien (si es que título se puede dar al que es pobre), pero de muy poca sal en la mollera. En resolución, tanto le dijo, tanto le persuadió y prometió, que el pobre villano se determinó de salirse con él y servirle de escudero. Decíale, entre otras cosas, don Quijote que se dispusiese a ir con él de buena gana, porque tal vez le podía suceder aventura que ganase, en quítame allá esas pajas, alguna ínsula, y le dejase a él por gobernador della. Con estas promesas y otras tales, Sancho Panza, que así llamaba labrador, dejó su mujer e hijos y asentó por escudero de su vecino.*

⁸ I have condensed the beginning section of Chapter 8.