

Letter From the Upper Midwest

by Sean Scallon

Blizzard



Storms and other phenomena of nature have their own distinct sounds. Those who have survived a tornado often say that it sounded “like a train.” A volley of cannon fire accompanies every thunderstorm. The gale-force winds of a hurricane howl at nearly 200 miles per hour, as the rain strikes objects with the velocity of a bullet. The only natural disaster that doesn’t have a sound is a drought, for it is a silent killer, a Kafkaesque occurrence in which a nice, sunny day with nary a cloud in the sky brings disaster.

A blizzard falls somewhere between hurricane and drought. Blizzard winds can gust to 80 miles per hour or more, and you can’t help but hear the shrieks, wails, and moans of the air rattling through the window panes, haunting you like a ghost. When the winds die down and it’s just the snow falling, however, you can pull the shades down and cozy up by the fire next to your favorite hound or loved one and pretend not to notice until it’s time to shovel the driveway.

There weren’t that many whitewash blizzards in the Upper Midwest last winter; in some places, there were none at all. Most of the nastiest storms struck the southern parts of Minnesota and Wisconsin, falling into Iowa and Northern Illinois. This troubles folks here. This may seem strange to outsiders, who wonder why anyone would derive pleasure from six-foot snowdrifts, icicles as tall as trees, temperatures low enough to grind bedrock, jackknifed trucks and overturned cars on the highways, piles of snow collapsing the roofs of neighborhood schools, and civilization coming to a screeching halt while a heavenly salt shaker with its cap unscrewed buries us all below. But it’s not really pleasure so much as assurance.

Sure, the snowmobilers, the skiers, the polar bears in human form all love the

snow and make millions from other polar bears. Yet, for most of us Midwesterners, a blizzard reaffirms who we are and why we choose to stay here. A blizzard can hit the South or the West or the Mid-Atlantic, as one sometimes does, and those who live there will curse God and Mother Nature for such a calamity and pray they may never see such a thing again. But for Midwesterners, blizzards and snowstorms are part of the natural order of things. What would our landscapes and homes look like if they were not wrapped in a shroud of white for six months out of the year? Brown, boring, and ugly. We can celebrate 60-degree temperatures in January if we know they are just a temporary escape from reality. Without the frozen tundra, we would lose our identity. If International Falls, Minnesota, were not known as the “Nation’s Icebox,” what would it be known as? To this day, I cannot fathom why some immigrants from tropical Third World countries (Mexico, Somalia, Laos) would want to live in this part of the country, to trade the warmth and sunshine that they are used to for the icy reality of land meant for the Nordics—the hearty souls from Northern Europe or from the great mountain ranges of the Alps, the Balkans, the Urals, the Carpathians, and the Pyrenées who understand how to tame the fiercest of winters.

A weather forecast up here nowadays can be a political platform as much as it is news. If the winter is a warm one (and, over the past decade, there have been several), then it is the perfect time to trot out the old global-warming theory and to campaign for signing the Kyoto Treaty. (Of course, since most weather records go back only to 1895 or a little earlier, can we really say this winter was warmer than any other? How does this winter compare to the winter of 1816? Or 1622? No one really knows, except for the environmentalists who never let such questions shake their dogmatic certainty.)

I tend to judge a winter by how many of the sporting events I cover get cancelled and rescheduled because of snowstorms, icy roads, foggy nights, or subzero temperatures. “It always snows around tournament time” is an old saying that, I hope, is unique to the Badger State. It certainly came true during the second week of March 2002, when a nasty blizzard parked itself over the Upper Mid-

west while I was staying in a hotel in Rice Lake, covering a basketball sectional. First came the freezing rain, coating the roads, trees, powerlines, and signs in ice as thick as maple syrup. Then came the sleet, laying down a layer of frozen pellets for an extra-crunchy sound when you walked. Finally came the snow, in small flakes, but so many as to resemble a swarm of insects. This white blindness was bright enough to create shadows in my hotel room. Of course, no blizzard is complete without wind to make it more interesting—in this case, gusts up to 70 miles per hour howling from the northwest, swirling the snow around as if Rice Lake were inside a mixer.

During part of the time that I spent trapped in Rice Lake, I could keep the shades drawn and ignore what was going outside except for the sound of the wind rattling the windows. But alas, my hotel had no room service, and so I had to brave the elements for provisions. I spent time outside in the storm scraping the ice and sleet off of my car, fixing my windshield wipers, and kicking away the snowdrifts piling up beside my wheels, while trying unsuccessfully to shield my face from the icy wind. And, as I scraped, I thought.

I thought about Valley Forge, how its harsh winter was the crucible in which our republic was born. I thought about the “Icy March” made by the brave soldiers of the Volunteer Army in March 1919, those Russian Whites who survived cold, hunger, starvation, disease, and the fierce blizzards of southern Russia, only to be chased by the Red Guards. Those who survived that campaign were given a medal that had a crown of thorns with a sword running through it. And I thought about our own soldiers in 2002, fighting and dying upon peaks and cliffs of snow-capped mountains in Afghanistan. Many of these soldiers were without sleeping bags or were equipped with winter gear left over from the 1950’s. I hope that, in those units, there were men from the Upper Midwest who could lead by example.

If history and culture show that winter can build the character of a man, then certainly the loss of so many people from our region to the Sunbelt over the past three decades is troubling. Some left to look for work. Others, the cowards and the shirkers, went away because they could not take the seasons anymore, leaving us

behind, supposedly to freeze and die in empty factories and abandoned fields. (That was the popular characterization of the “Rustbelt” back in the 1970’s and 80’s.) Still others, the snowbirds, leave just for six months, heading to their condos in Arizona, Florida, Texas, and New Mexico. They claim that their old bones can’t take clearing their walks anymore, even with a snowblower. Once upon a time, a neighbor might have looked after them to make sure they weren’t buried alive, but in a self-centered society such as ours, why take any chances when you can have sun year-round?

A good chunk of my hometown of Ellsworth, Wisconsin, migrates when November comes around and doesn’t return until April. At the newspaper I work for, we have to make many address changes on subscriptions to make sure they reach the right resorts. With the state of the mail, it is a hit-or-miss proposition (often a miss), and we don’t hear the end of it. During a village board meeting, the village president joked that we should hold our December, January, and February meetings in Florida, Texas, and Arizona, since that’s where much of our constituency is. In fact, one board member was already down there, a snowbird himself, away from his duties as a village trustee for five months out of the year. I voted against him in the last election and was pleased he didn’t win.

There’s no question that America has held a prejudice against winter for the past 30 years, but that may be changing. Besides the rise of winter tourism, we have the recent success of the U.S. Winter Olympic team, which won more medals than ever before, and the romanticization of the Green Bay Packers and the “frozen tundra” they play on. Recently, I saw a photo of a Duluth man shoveling his driveway after yet another winter storm dumped a foot of snow on the city. He commented that he had moved back to Duluth from New Mexico to experience the certainty of winter along Superior’s shores once again.

This past winter, I was more annoyed than ever by the juvenile chit-chat of our local anchors and weathermen whenever a spate of Chinook winds brought us a warm spell. I get the impression that they wish the whole region, if not the whole country, had weather as boring as that in Seattle or California. They seem oblivious of the region in which they live and of what its climate should be. Nasty e-mails from snow-lovers have to serve as

reminders to the talking heads: “Upper Midwest winters—love ’em or leave ’em!”

Sean Scallon is a reporter who lives in East Ellsworth, Wisconsin.

Letter From Cuba

by Doug Bandow

A Dying Dictatorship



Avenida 21, number 3014, is a nondescript house in an Havana suburb. The paint is peeling; the walls are plain; the rooms are sparse. Inside lives Elizardo Sanchez Santa Cruz, a Cuban dissident working to free the Cuban people. The task is not easy. Despite the collapse of communism elsewhere, here “political repression has been increasing,” says Sanchez. People are routinely detained; independent journalists and human-rights activists are beaten and jailed. Tracey Eaton, the *Dallas Morning News* correspondent in Havana, observes that you “couldn’t get anyone from our world to say that human rights are flourishing.” Vicki Huddleston, until recently head of the U.S. Interests Section in Cuba, agrees: “This government is very good at intimidation.”

That intimidation has not prevented Cubans from risking their lives, freedom, and property to fight for human rights. Sanchez is known as the dean of human-rights activists and heads the Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation. Of medium stature and with gray, receding hair, the 59-year-old Sanchez doesn’t look like someone who would strike fear in the Cuban government. But, as Sanchez notes, while the regime took power in 1959 in a genuinely popular revolution, “the base of support of the government has been shrinking” ever since.

That would make any dictatorship nervous. Sanchez observes wryly that he has spent “only eight-and-a-half years in prison”; colleagues have been jailed for as many as 30 years. His crimes include criticizing Castro in private conversation, speaking of jails loaded with political prisoners, and attacking the regime’s purge of popular military figures. The latter generated a charge of “disseminating

false news against international peace.” The Castro regime’s policy is simple, Sanchez explains: It violates “all political, economic, and civil rights.” Because of the vagaries of the regime, however, “repression in Cuba has oscillated, sometimes increasing, sometimes decreasing.” The level of repression depends, in large part, on the degree to which people express discontent. More popular opposition yields more repression—as when students stormed the Mexican embassy in spring 2002 in hopes of gaining exit visas. The physical force employed against them by the government was “pretty startling,” says Huddleston. Thus, today, says Sanchez, “political repression is bigger in a horizontal sense,” with “more political repression against all of the population.” Huddleston voices similar concerns: “For me, the most worrisome thing is that the situation will be shoved backwards.”

Moreover, for those imprisoned, the circumstances are probably worse now than they were in the past. Explains Sanchez, “When I was in jail, conditions were very bad.” Now, however, “former political prisoners say that prisons seemed to be hotels compared to what they are now.” There is some good news mixed among the bad. During the 1990’s, there were some 1,000 political prisoners. Today, Sanchez notes, there are “only” 220, but that is still the highest in the Western hemisphere and “one of the highest in the world in relative terms.”

While it was once “very dangerous” for human-rights activists to meet with the foreign press, Sanchez now does so without obvious retaliation. The regime, he claims, “would like us to be dead, but they know that the political cost would be too high.”

Moreover, “we are not an immediate threat to the government.” So it “has understood that it doesn’t need to have so many political prisoners to maintain control.” Huddleston concurs: “As the government has consolidated power, it has less need to execute and imprison” opponents.

There has been some improvement in religious freedom, especially since the Pope’s visit in 1998. The government does not interfere in the internal affairs of the Church, but, explained Huddleston, “in every town a religious commission decides whether the Church can provide social services, hold marches, and conduct other activities.” Moreover, while Catholic and Protestant churches are flourishing, expectations generated by