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To: The Climate Club -- C759

From: Walt Roberts

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PROVOCATIONS -- No. 60

A Mind that Relishes Complexity

"The human brain delights in the balance of contrasting thoughts. The most effective rhetoric often exploits an apparent paradox ('Let us never negotiate out of fear but let us never fear to negotiate.') Truth seems often to come wrapped in small paradoxical packages. I have come to believe that the art of executive leadership is above all a taste for paradox, a talent for ambiguity, the capacity to hold contradictory propositions comfortably in a mind that relishes complexity."

Harlan Cleveland, author of these words, is a magnificent example of a mind that relishes complexity in a person splendidly endowed with the art of executive leadership. We are indeed fortunate that he will be on line as our December moderator. His new book, "The Knowledge Executive: Leadership in an Information Society" will be out before then, and will be superb as background reading. The book was being written when he was on line with us last time, and he shared some of the drafts with us then. Newcomers and old hands have a great treat in store when Harlan shares with us his love of subtlety, his wordsmithing skills, and his insights on the passing of remoteness with the onset of the information age.

In one chapter of the book Harlan reminds us that for almost a century, from Andrew Jackson to Woodrow Wilson, our nation sought to find security in isolation, and even after WW I tried to "reenter the cocoon of remoteness." Now, he says, we are involved again, and this time, it seems, forever. He quotes Octavio Paz, poet, who caught on to this in the 1970's, "We Mexicans have always lived on the periphery of history. Now the center or nucleus of world society has disintegrated and everyone--including the European and the North American--is a peripheral being. We are living on the margin....because there is no longer any center....World history has become everyone's and our own labyrinth is the labyrinth of all mankind."

Remoteness is gone. We plug into the hour-by-hour ordeals of the victims of a hijacked airliner, the meteoric rise of an unheralded Wimbledon champion, and the day-to-day trend of drought and food in Ethiopia. We establish communities that are not places, involving people we have not seen. Someday I will meet, a handshake away, Paul Levinson, friend, colleague and co-conspirator. Miguel Uribe, my respected friend and associate, comes to my home every week without leaving Bogota.

In science what better example of the passing of remoteness than the World Weather Watch! I'm proud to say, both Harlan and I played roles in making weather and climate a global enterprise, a melding of talent, resources and human energy by people from everywhere on earth. Here, joined by artificial satellites peering down on earth from every feasible orbit, using all kinds of sensors, the nations have pooled their sovereignties to build a common world system of weather observation and research that benefits not one or a few, but all. It is a system vastly more useful to each than each could obtain alone.

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"We....need to think hard about the kind of world we want; no one runs the world, but the United States always seems to get on the executive committee....The world we are not remote from is leaderless, dangerous, uneconomic, unjust and ungovernable. The problem for the 'executive committee' is to exercise leadership in moderating its dangers, enhancing its efficiencies, rectifying its injustices, and arranging the governance of its necessarily international functions."

Harlan, we await you with eagerness!

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