

## 030319 King of Cats

Last year I wrote about how the start of Lent brought with it the introduction of the long awaited Easter Beer. This special brew packs quite a punch and is a special way to celebrate the religious holiday. However, there is also the tradition of Fastelavn which takes place every year on the Monday preceding Ash Wednesday. Originally a strange mix of coming-of-age experiences and Roman Catholic traditions, the celebration has lost its original meaning, but is still celebrated by children throughout Denmark.

Children dress up in costumes and armed with Lenten Birches (branches that they have decorated with paper and candy), the children wander around their neighborhoods during the day, singing in hopes of being given sweets, coins or the special pastries baked for the holiday. The climax of the day is when the children gather around a barrel suspended from a tree or pole. The children take turns in trying to smash the barrel with a bat to release the candies and fruits inside (much like the Mexican piñatas). The original tradition called for the smashing a wooden barrel with a live cat inside, but fortunately this tradition has been abandoned. However, the cat may still be remembered by a paper picture of a cat on the outside of the barrel. The child who knocks down the barrel will be the “kattedronning” (Queen of Cats) and the one who smashes the last board will be the “kattekonge” (King of Cats).

### Liechtenstein

I don't know if you have heard, but in these days of declining power by the monarchy, the people of Liechtenstein voted last week to make their prince an absolute monarch. The vote was demanded by Prince Hans-Adams II who in a statement reminiscent of a child, threatened to go into self-exile in Austria if his demands for more power were not met. Critics warned that giving the prince so much power would turn the small kingdom into a dictatorship since he would have the power to veto decisions of parliament and to sack the government. However, most of the citizens of Liechtenstein are fond of the royal family and so nearly two thirds of the 32,000 citizens voted to keep the prince. At 160 square kilometers, Liechtenstein is the sixth smallest country in the world.

### So TV is the same everywhere

One of my biggest complaints about the news media in the US is that it is over sensationalized and it focuses most of its attention on local and national news. If any time is left over, international news is covered. I remember a Saturday Night Live skit where a newscaster was reading the evening news. The first item was a horrific crash where two planes had collided in Algeria, killing over 500 people. No Americans on board. Next item. And in Sri Lanka, an American has been reported to have stubbed his toe. We take you live to Colombo to check on his condition. . .

Recent discussions about the news with friends from other countries has showed that they have a similar impression of the news in the US. However, what I am learning is that the US news is not necessarily alone in its faults or in misreporting. The news of

European countries does cover European events. But, the news in Denmark and I imagine most of the other countries devotes a large amount of time to national news. Of course, that is what interests the local population. But during a recent, heated debate with a Danish friend over the NATO deployment in Turkey, I learned that the Danish media has been reporting that the US public is firmly behind a war with Iraq. My Danish friend was surprised to even hear about the massive protests in NY, DC and other cities because there had been no mention of them in the news. Could a lack of information on both sides of the Atlantic be part of the rift between the US and Europe?

Nor is the news here always accurate. A friend of mine from Italy was surprised to see me back in Denmark in February. One of the news stations in Italy had announced that all US citizens were being called back to the US in preparation for a possible war. As my Danish improves, it will be interesting to learn more about what the Danes watch on the news.

## Iraq

Of course I had to write on the war, so you really don't have to keep reading past this point if you don't want to do so.

Like everyone else, I have been watching and reading as events are unfolding and have been spending a lot of time thinking about the situation. What is on a lot of people's minds at the moment is how Bush has now sidestepped the United Nations. The US is the only big dog in the world right now and so Bush can do this. Could you imagine if a smaller country such as Pakistan tried to invade India on such thin pretense? The difficult part is that it was the UN resolutions and the threat of sanctions which have been preventing a full scale war between Pakistan and India for all of these years.

It would be foolhardy to imagine that the US will always be the big dog in town for forever. Case in point would, who in the late 80's would have ever thought the USSR would fall? Rome, Germany and the Ottoman Empire are another few big dogs who fell. My point here is that I fear that one day, the US will itself call on the protection of the UN during a crisis. However, due to the new world order, the protection that the US could have every reason to expect, may not be forthcoming. The old rules are changing and I am thinking ahead to what it could mean in the future.

How can the US now claim that N Korea or Pakistan is in violation of UN resolutions? What does that mean now? The methodology which has been used by the administration is setting the precedent of how weapon crises will be handled in the future. It begs the question of what will happen with N Korea. Pyongyang is a master of manipulation and must surely see this. The N Koreans have already claimed the right to the same doctrine of a justified preemptive strike against the US. It does not take a military strategist to see that a war in one part of Asia would be an ideal time to start another war in another part. Surely, the N Koreans have seen the US threats and expect to be next on the list. Furthermore, the S Koreans and Japan have supported the Bush administrations decision to attack Iraq. N Korea must be feeling a bit squeezed at the moment. The question is what will they do?

France is the scapegoat at the moment, but one could argue that like the US, they were only looking after their own interests. Why has this become so personal to Bush as the goal changed from getting rid of weapons to getting rid of Saddam? How could the administration have been so clumsy in getting the country into this situation? What if the war does not go as quickly as has been predicted. Bush has bet not only his own presidency, but also the reputation of the country on a quick war that can be won. If the US gets bogged down and if the war drags on, it will only fuel extremists who will see the US as being weak.

To see that the current situation would come to a head, one only needs to look at the war in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was an illegal war without a UN resolution, but the world was clearly willing to let that slip at the time. Bush could very easily have gotten a UN resolution permitting the use of force in Afghanistan, but he chose not to do so. Why not? One might suppose that the Bush administration considered the UN irrelevant. So did the Clinton administration when the US and NATO attacked the former Yugoslavia which was another illegal war without UN backing. What is interesting is that Germany and France went along with the war in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. Also, Robin Cook was a big figure in getting the British backing for the war in Yugoslavia. What changed for him now to resign over Iraq?

What is being reported on here is of course the war, but a lot of emphasis on the impending humanitarian crisis which in but hours from unfolding. UNICEF is painfully sort of funds for programs throughout the world, let alone for Iraq. The Kofi Annon has called on donations for the refugee camps, but the pledges he has received do not add to what he needs today or what he will be asking for tomorrow. One third of the children in Iraq are malnourished and over 60% were dependant on the defunct UN Oil for Food Program. How will the US provide food for the Iraqi population, the refugees, the prisoners of war and its own troops? The crisis is very predictable, but where will the money come from?

Turkey has in a sense preserved the integrity of NATO by only allowing a vote to allow the US to fly over the country. But, will Turkey pour over their border and into Kurdish Iraq? Will the Kurds suffer greatly in this war as they did in the last?

I stayed up to watch the Bush address at 02:00. By morning, I saw that Poland had committed 200 troops and that the Danish Parliament was debating if troops should be sent. This step is a big one for Denmark which is a country which really tries not to upset anyone in the world. In Afghanistan, the Danish soldiers are not allowed to fight, but this has hardly kept them out of danger. Several Danish soldiers were killed during the disarming of munitions. In the end, the Danish Parliament did support the US war, but due to the low support in the Danish population, the parliament voted only to send one submarine and one plane. Perhaps they will get to the Gulf by the time the war starts.

However, in the end I think that it is important that despite what misgivings we each may have about the war, that we support the troops who are now being put in harms way and their families. The individual soldiers themselves may not be convinced that the action is correct and I am sure that dying in the desert is not something that

anyone relishes, but they are carrying out the job that they pledged to do. We can protest the government that sent them, but the troops themselves deserve our support.

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