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THE BUSH ECONOMY

A rash of surreal encounters with professional ineptitude leaves our protagonists feeling like maybe the runaway economic success of America circa Bush II, combined with the worthy moral standards set for business by the highest echelons of government, are not entirely dissociated.

It's a tough time to be in the IT industry. I say this having had an unpleasant string of interviews this Spring, in which the interviewers lied to me, stood me up after I took time off work to be there, or stated assertions that were, simply, not true, then questioned my knowledge of my field when I had the gall to tell them they were wrong. Rocky, yesterday, had another such interview, where the interviewer seemed to be making stuff up as he went along, telling Rocky *he* was wrong for stating that a SQL stored procedure with a type mismatch couldn't work. Rocky was supposed to be wrong because, after all, the stored procedure was in production. Not that this company's website ran smoothly. As he was experiencing interview hell, I was being accosted by someone from the laughably inept consulting firm my employer hired to roll out a project (a project which is over budget and past due, and during which we've seen three employees at the consulting company resign or get canned), who was telling me I clearly didn't understand source control, since I didn't agree with him that standard practice with CVS was to set it up for exclusive checkout. I didn't agree with him because he's wrong; because I've actually used CVS extensively; because I'm familiar enough with it to know common syntax off the top of my head, and he's not; and because, while, like most software, one could set CVS up to behave in multiple ways, no single one of them is unambiguously correct for every situation. This not more than thirty minutes after he asked me to help him connect to our company's CVS server, as he was unable to figure that out on his own.

So, really, I'm getting very tired of people who don't know jack calling me a moron to my face when I call them on their lies. It's hard for me to figure out whether this is just a recent trend, or the way the industry has always been

on the east coast. I tend to believe it's the former, since it seems to have gotten worse in the last couple of years. That makes me wonder what's causing things to get worse. I don't have to look hard.

Neocons are fond of the notion of trickle-down. They blasted President Clinton—remember, the president the media forgot about when they lied and claimed Reagan was the most popular in modern history? —for the whole Monica Lewinsky thing because they were worried he'd set a bad example for the youth of the nation. Emulating them, I suppose it's fair to say they believe the highest levels of the executive branch set the standard for behavior which the rest of the country follows. Trickle-down morality, one might call it.

I'm not such a believer in the notion of trickle-down wealth, but I could buy into trickle-down morality, at least as it applies to management practice. I don't think it's unreasonable to believe that guys in bad suits, worse loafers, and logo polos look to Enron and W to see for what society holds them accountable, if anything. The metaphor I've found to describe the shining example the executive branch is setting is simple: it's called "Shit Floats."

My eighth-grade English teacher tried to convince all us kids that grammar was important. Actually, being born and raised in New Hampshire, she said that "grammah" was important, but, after I figured out that she was not in fact talking about the mother of one of my parents, I took her at her word. Public schooling succeeds only when children believe that getting "educated" is in their best interest. It's a shame, then, that I still have yet to hear the freely-elected leader of our great country—wait a second; let me rephrase for accuracy; It's a shame that I have yet to hear the leader of our great country utter a single, grammatical sentence. I'll settle for common

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usage of the subjunctive—just give me something in the vicinity of subject-verb agreement. Intelligence is clearly not a worthy goal for us Americans any more. And no, I don't equate intelligence with grammar; but it's absurd to claim that someone who cannot communicate subtle ideas—ever—is intelligent. We're proud of our dumb-ass president. That's the first example we set for our youth. To be successful, one needn't be able to communicate with lucidity and poise.

The next example is that one doesn't need to communicate things that are even true. I don't think I need to provide exhaustive examples; there are the whoppers that should have everyone hopping mad—lying to Congress about the existence of weapons of mass destruction; lying to the American people, repeatedly, after it's been disproved, about a mythical connection between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein; lying about global warming; lying about illegal energy price-fixing in California; lying about tax cuts. There are also the smaller, everyday lies, the ones that don't seem to serve any political purpose, but that maybe just come out because, once you get in the habit of lying about everything, it's hard to stop. I'd actually say that once you start spinning elaborate webs of lies built on other lies, it gets hard to differentiate between a couple different versions of your story and what really happened. Remember the series of inaccurate revisions of Cheney's whereabouts on 9/11? Or his new claim that he called the president that morning to get authorization to shoot down the airliners, even though the 9/11 commission has found no evidence to back his claim—and Bush ended up using an insecure cell-phone to call Washington from his motorcade because he was unable to get in touch with military leaders? Somehow we've arrived at a place where a fact-check is a luxury we cannot afford, and people in positions that carry a responsibility to do otherwise see it as best to repeat the lies handed to them from on high. When challenged—why do you knowingly help spread lies, when your job is to report but challenge everything reported to you as fact? —they can only say that if they didn't assist, if they questioned, and did the job our history books preach is the role of the press, they might lose first-hand access to the lies. Circular arguments anyone? I guess logic is out the window, too. The result is that we get lies repeated by liars who hypocritically maintain an air of self-righteousness as they hammer out

an ostinato of bullshit that would make many a Third Reich propagandist proud.

Another trait I see shared between the executive branch of the government and inept IT firms is hypocrisy. Any rule that applies to you doesn't need to apply to me. Just because. "We all need to tighten our belts," say the managers at our firm, as they give themselves promotions that allow them to buy cars worth more than my entire (not insubstantial) debt, and rumors of impending layoffs circulate. "Clinton perjured himself!" scream the neocons, as the W administration violates federal law by revealing the identity of deep-cover CIA operatives and W lies to Congress. The message is clear: what's okay for me isn't okay for you, just because.

I tend to be a contextualist. I don't think it's usually right to make snap judgments about any complex system without understanding it. Not a lot of people are like me, particularly in software. Most developers like to conceive of hideously complicated software systems, dissociated from the humans who will use them. I've used enough of those systems to find them distasteful. Other people, though, seem to relish making grand pronouncements about issues they don't fully comprehend. "CVS should always be used with exclusive checkouts." "Homosexuality is a sin." It's easy to tell when someone is basing decisions on an irrational tendency towards absolutism: these people won't debate you, or, if they will, cannot defend their positions using logic. They'll try to use circular arguments based on abstract, self-referential concepts like the Word of God and faith; or they will simply refuse to entertain debate. Witness the developer who's driving me nuts this week. He'll ask a question, but then, rather than listen to me as I attempt to answer it, he'll interrupt me to ask about how my partial response so far interacts with an incorrect assumption he's making, which he won't allow me the opportunity to correct.

I've noticed an increasing number of assumptions lately, and a reticence to entertain any disagreement. People in positions of power are happy to assume I'm an idiot, and unwilling to listen to any rational argument. The problem is that, just because I don't agree with you, that doesn't mean I don't understand what you're trying to say. It just means I think you're wrong, that you're drawing incorrect conclusions from your data. However, when I hear you disagreeing with *me*, while repeating assumptions that you've gotten in your noggin I don't know how, and

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refusing to listen to me when I try to explain why I think they're incorrect—then I will believe, correctly, I think, that you don't understand me, but still disagree with me. You're drawing conclusions based on "data" that I don't agree with. Your conclusions are different, but that's meaningless. Since your disagreement with me isn't based on rationality—you're arguing with positions that I tell you again and again I don't take—I have to assume it's based in prejudice. How do I argue with prejudice?

The trick, of course, is that I don't. I get around prejudice by being born into the in group—the extroverts, the straight healthy white upper-middle-class males, the Asian men willing to out-xenophobe the white ones for access to the club—access which may be revoked whenever race becomes an issue again, or Asian-ness a liability. Almost all the prejudices are based on immutable characteristics, whether they're sexuality, gender, birth-status, or just personality. They reinforce an unspoken assumption, a deep belief in the power and virtue of absolutes. Arabs are evil. So are homosexuals. God is good, and religion is just, but only that one flavor of Christian God filtered through one particular set of inaccurate translations. And the Jewish God. Except when he's not. The word of God is paramount—except when he's talking about stuff we don't really take seriously. We take the fuzzy admonitions against homosexuality seriously, and refuse to change them just because metrosexuality is in fashion. Divorce? That's fine. We'd have to make pariahs of horny cheating straight men if we forbade divorce. Oh, but we enforce the rules against sinners because we love them. That's why we don't support criminalizing abuse of sinners—because we love them. And hate the sin. There's nothing to see here. Our absolutes are all firmly based in logic and rationalism. Just not rational humanism—we don't believe in that.

Absolutism tends to result in chaotic systems where group loyalty is seen as an undeniable virtue, yet groups aren't held accountable for *their* loyalty. The classic business example is the "team player." Always be wary when you hear propagandized terms like "team player." What a manager means when he uses the term—for example, "We hope our developers will be team players, and not complain about taking this temporary pay cut while we go to a management golfing retreat"—is "fuck you." What do you get in return for being a team

player? Aside from a reduction in wages and benefits, and the inevitable layoff in six to twelve months? Where is the firm's reciprocal loyalty to you, in exchange for your sacrifices? In America these days, it's nowhere. Corporate entities are fickle. They owe allegiance only to the cabal heading them at this moment. The makeup of that cabal can change at any time, as the result of a backslap or a back-stab.

It's hard enough to believe that people in power are unconsciously ignoring facts, if they prove to be inconvenient—that they filter reality, like all of us must, through their own beliefs and values, but are a little worse at noticing the contradictions, a little better at letting them slide. What's truly frightening is to think that this is deliberate. We have a new CIO at work. In the speech he gave to introduce himself to the IT department, one of the aphorisms he belted off was "the surest way not to get promoted is to propose a plan that fixes problems that your company has had in the past." He went on to describe, in glowing terms, how little he cared about the past—"yesterday was yesterday; we don't care about it any more"—and how important it was to look forward. Well, sure, it's important to embrace the future (although, if I may be forgiven for taking the opportunity to speculate, I'd posit that a man in his position of control, at his income level, and spouting his philosophies is likely to be a Republican, and that that's not a demographic I've historically associated with looking forward and embracing new things—such as, say, gay marriage.) But how can you ever learn anything—in fact, how can you even claim to have a grasp on reality, future or present—if you forget the past as soon as it happens? How can there be any such thing as accountability or responsibility if what happened yesterday stays in yesterday? Without responsibility, how can there be virtue, or learning, and without those, how can there be progress? This was such an absurd notion, I think I laughed at it at the time—but I was the only one to do so.

I don't think his philosophy of management, and the incidence of unchallenged bullshit in the IT department, are unrelated. I still can't quite fathom the level of emotional and intellectual disconnect with reality a consultant—or an interviewer, or a president—needs to maintain to look me in the eye and, knowing I know the truth, lie to me. I know that if I found my child doing that, and asked her why, and she said "well, why is it okay for the President to do it?," I'd be livid—with her,

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but more so with this administration and its enablers and excusers in the media, that make this kind of behavior acceptable, and spread it through the strata of power until it's staring me in the face in the form of a rude consultant. It shouldn't be this way. How can you build a pleasant society upon lies, upon privilege, upon rights to which individuals are born, but which they cannot earn? How can you champion notions of absolute law and morality based on a web of lies? How do I interview successfully, in a society where I'm a pariah for knowing what I'm talking about?

I think I can account for a small part of this, by examining my own responses to recent events. When idiot developer looks me in the eye and says something I know for a fact is wrong, my reaction, being a non-asshole, is to question reality, to wonder "Am I on drugs, or is he?," and to want to reaffirm that I know what I know. I think the Type A liars have a different reaction. Full of self-assurance, and having been trained from birth that self-doubt is for the underclasses, they just try to out-shout anyone with a contrary view. Maybe I need to start doing that.

I wonder sometimes whether the other half of the secret is telling bigger lies than they spout. That doesn't seem to be a reliable practice, but it's hard to discount. After all, the bigger the lie, the higher the position. It's hard to discount the notion that shit floats—but, as an honest individual, enamored of reason and consistency, how do I represent myself as the biggest turd? How does one out-lie the incomprehensibly blatant liars?

I am not capable of working with rude, ignorant developers who make assumptions they refuse to let me correct, and won't listen to me. Should that be a problem for me in the 21st-Century business world? I don't think it should, but I fear I may be outnumbered. We're moving away from personal responsibility. We're moving away from a culture where virtue and ability are rewarded. I may offer a ringing indictment of the industry I've chosen to work in, but I think I have good reason. I'm a smart developer. I have

excellent ideas. I challenge assumptions, and approach problems intellectually, from first principles. Sometimes, this leads me to hold unpopular views, but I stand by them, as I stand by the process that led me to them. I have yet to work at a job where I feel like I'm challenged, or where anyone wants to make use of my intellectual abilities—but I've worked at many where I've been asked to stop thinking about things—to, effectively, shut up and toe the line. That's not my nature, and I refuse to apologize for that. I think the world would be better off if more people were like me, and I'm tired of pretending I enjoy licking the boots of this culture of ineptitude. It's time for regime change in the U.S., certainly—it's time we had an openly elected leader once again—and I have to hope that a result of reinstating the Republic will be a change in leadership attitudes across all levels of society.

Jobs don't exist to make the world a better place—not most of them. They exist to make people money—to provide a mechanism for distribution of wealth, property, and the things we require to live. At most workplaces, I think people don't think of what they do as important. I'm not happy about that—I'm not happy that, when I told one place I was interviewing at this Spring that I wanted to change the world, the guy said "well, we don't change the world here." But I don't try to fool myself into believing we have to make the world better through work. I'd be satisfied with just going to a job that I didn't have to take home with me every night, where I earned enough to pay my bills and buy the occasional nice meal and new CD, and where my coworkers were pleasant and affable—a job that left me with energy to better the world on my own time. I haven't had that since I left Tucson. If Boston is any indication, I think the country's heading in exactly the wrong direction in terms of life-work balance, in terms of fulfillment, in terms of intellectual honesty and rigor, and, of course, in the relationship between politics and media. I'm not really sure what to do about it, mostly because I can't understand how it continues to go on like it is. Things need to change.

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