

## THE PARABLE OF THE CAVE (PART ONE) By Howard N. Ellman

In my day, most of us were exposed to ancient Greek philosophy in mandatory high school classes – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle principally. Typically, none of it stuck – except as a vague recollection of inexorable boredom.

A rekindled interest in history and philosophy in later life caused me to revisit the writings of these ancient seers, mostly through CDs I purchased from an educational company to help pass the time on long drives. I stumbled across Plato's *Parable of the Cave* in that fashion. The parable goes something like this:

In ancient times, members of a particular tribe lived out their lives entirely underground. They existed in a monochrome world of shadow, without season, day, night, sunshine, moon, a sense of the seasons, subsisting in the dimmest of light. Having adjusted to their environment, they found comfort in it, the comfort of routine and an existence with settled boundaries.

One day, by accident, one of their number stumbled out of the cave into the world above ground to confront a spring dawn of brilliant sunrise and sweet-smelling vegetation, celebrating the renewal of the season. He saw flowers, a sky of dazzling light. He rushed back to the cave to tell the others of his discovery.

They listened to him in growing consternation. Hearing in his tale a direct threat to the settled rhythms of their complacency, they killed him.<sup>1</sup>

The parable came to mind when I read Rob Olson's article in the recent issue of *Delta Waterfowl* (Fall 2006), in which he described the process by which Delta got itself kicked off the Board of the Prairie Pothole Habitat Joint Venture. Delta had published facts that tended to expose apparent failures of the Joint Venture to achieve the goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. Delta had the audacity to suggest that the Joint Venture might be committed to strategies that were no longer working, if they ever had worked.

Finding the expression of such seditious views odious to them (and their fund-raising efforts), the other members of the Joint Venture demanded that all member organizations sign an agreement not to go public with information inconsistent with the

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars speculate that Plato wrote the parable to condemn those who forced Socrates to drink the hemlock as punishment for teaching Athenian youth philosophy deemed seditious. Thus, as it is probably a political polemic, I feel no embarrassment in using it for a similar purpose.

party line – effectively a gag order. When Delta refused, the others voted to exclude it from the Joint Venture.

The parable does not apply exactly to this situation – for there, the cave dwellers rejected word brought by a bearer of what should have been glad tidings. Delta has suffered a fate more commonly reserved for those who are the bearers of the bad – suggestions that the Joint Venture has failed in its mission and should seriously consider a midcourse correction. One can understand why organizations that have received over \$650 million in grants might experience discomfort at the prospect of telling the grantors that the money – if not wasted entirely – has not achieved the stated objective for which it was solicited, and seems to be producing even less with the passage of time.

The aversion to truth in such an instance is sadly predictable – albeit no less reprehensible – when one considers that the persons involved have received their compensation at least in part from that grant money. How can they justify their funding requests if they have presided over a failing regime? No wonder that the organization willing to confront the failures finds rejection as its reward for revelation.

A number of currents interact here and it is well worth the effort to attempt to untangle them. First, and most obviously, bureaucracies (whether government or private) that depend upon a flow of grant money, bestowed in the hope and promise of achieving a certain purpose, cannot abide publication of news that the money has been spent in vain and that the stated goal dances tantalizingly out of reach for reasons that no one comprehends. Fear of having to account for the \$650 million and why it has failed to make significant advances toward the goal tends to overpower the more important objective of getting to the bottom of the matter. Why has the program sputtered? What corrections should be made to make it more effective? Unfortunately, the natural human tendency produces more effort in the exercise of denying failure and avoiding blame than in exposing the truth.

This is not a problem unique to waterfowl management. But assuming that our managers don't live in a vacuum, *one would have expected them to take note of two immutable truths that apply universally in these times and in this society:*

First, scandals become scandalous in direct proportion to the effort made to suppress the unwelcome facts that lie at their core. The bad facts themselves create a problem – but the attempted cover-up invariably reflects far more discredit on those in charge than the bad facts themselves – and in that process, inevitably exposes the perpetrators to greater and more destructive retribution when they are exposed as they always will be (see rule Second below). The cover-up becomes the malevolent beating heart of the scandal, often overshadowing the facts that triggered the attempted suppression effort in the first place. Watergate, WorldCom, Enron, Iran/Contra, Hastert/Foley – who needs more examples to prove the point? I could cite many more, sadly enough.

Second, in this age of the internet, *no one can bring off a successful cover-up in any matter that involves more than two people.* Someone will spill the beans. Someone will play the role of Deep Throat. Whether overtly or covertly an informant will emerge

and those who are caught out will look far worse than if they had simply copped to the problem. This phenomenon is so well established, so obvious and inevitable as to raise serious questions with respect to the intelligence and qualities of observation possessed by those who ignore it.

The Founding Fathers made freedom of speech and of the press fundamental pillars of our system of government, recognizing that the hammer and anvil of freewheeling debate generally forge the best solution to vexing and difficult problems. And because humans tend to seek company in the like-minded and suppress dissent, those freedoms required constitutional protection. We seem to reinforce the wisdom of that seminal judgment every year, in case after case rejecting efforts to infringe upon those rights.

In short, whereas editors, bloggers, columnists, commentators of all sorts are entitled to their views – and to take positions that brook no dissent – the decision-makers are expected to base their judgments on a balanced assessment of competing views, including those critical of their performance – *and not attempt to suppress the very existence of those views*. Those who cannot accept that part of the task should resign to make way for those who can.

Delta's challenge to the PPRJV program is probably accurate and may not be the whole story. But the issue is far larger than the merits of Delta's position. When those in charge of such an important program demonstrate an entrenched inability to entertain informed and responsible dissent – let alone acknowledge it, shine a searchlight on it and deal with it fairly and forthrightly on the merits – they have demonstrated their qualification for replacement. Indeed, the straws in the wind foretell far worse news in the offing as the Service and others complete the pending update of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. If the portents prove true, the effort to cast out the truth-tellers from the Temple will look even sillier and more reprehensible than it does today.

We do not accept imperial temperament in our governing institutions in this country. We have learned to punish those who exhibit it. Time to apply that particular truth to those in charge of our heritage who would deny reality for their own personal purposes. So as the weight of accumulating fact converts the cave into a pressure cooker, prepare for the explosion – augmented by the effort to suppress the truth just as diesel fuel can turn nitrous fertilizer into a deadly bomb. When it blows, none of the cave dwellers will escape unscorched.

Whether you view the explosion as a form of creative destruction may be a matter of perspective – but destruction there shall be. One can hope that those who sift through the debris will learn its lessons and devise more effective strategies for the future.

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If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.

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