

# Village Soup

## Knox County

### New World Disorder and America's future

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Those of us participating in the 31st Camden Conference last weekend were braced for serious dialogue given the conference theme "New World Disorder and America's Future." We were not disappointed. From Friday's keynoter Stephen Walt, professor of International Affairs at the Kennedy School, to the final address, "This Too Shall Pass" from Chas Freeman, a retired dean of the Foreign Service, the Camden Opera House was alive with spirited dialogue, healthy debate, and a sense of community as welcome as it is rare these days.

There was difference of opinion on the rise of populism in the U.S. and Europe, on Brexit as viewed from Britain and France, on the need for continued U.S. troops in Europe, on China and its role in this century, on the likelihood of nuclear war in the Korean Peninsula, and on whether Europe could "hold the fort" on world order to counter the disruptive tendencies of Trump foreign policy. It was an exhilarating, exciting and exhausting three days.

Stephen Walt opened by painting a picture of American foreign policy after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This was to be the era of liberal hegemony with America the dominant world power championing democracy and free market economics. It was a heady time. How soon we forget.

Walt went on to point out all the ways we had squandered that advantage – our unilateral invasion of Iraq, our involvement in assisting the toppling of dictators in Libya and Egypt, our disregard for the rules and norms of international behavior that we ourselves had helped create. By the end of his keynote he was quoting from "How Democracies Die" a book recently published by a Harvard colleague. It was a sobering note on which to open the Conference.

What followed on Saturday and Sunday morning was the kind of format that keeps many of us coming back to Camden: moderated sessions that usually feature two or three speakers, followed by a lengthy Q&A with those speakers, with questions from a full house at the Camden Opera House and satellite groups in Rockland, Belfast and at USM in Portland. This year more than 1000 participated in the Conference, including more than 200 students from colleges and high schools around Maine, where they have participated in a semester-long course built around the Conference reading list. The students added lots of energy and challenge from their places in the balcony of the Opera House.

While the Conference attracts excellent speakers from all over the globe, it comes alive in the Q&A sessions. It is civic dialogue at its best, prompting moderator Indira Lakshmanan, Boston Globe columnist and current NPR On Point host to call for some way to replicate this kind of discourse beyond Camden. It is a theme those of us who have attended for many years share.

There is a special quality about this gathering. It is partly, of course, the quality of the dialogue, the relevance of the themes tackled each year, the participation of an engaged audience, and the skill of a moderator like Lakshmanan, and, for many years before Indira, Professor Nicholas Burns of the Kennedy School. It is also the sense of community in the historic Opera House and in the town of Camden itself. It seems that more than half the town is involved in this largely volunteer event and it shows. Few could have imagined such an event in this small coastal town in the middle of a Maine winter when it started more than 30 years ago.

I cannot do justice to all of the speakers at this year's event. Walt was a standout. Matthew Goodwin, a British professor of politics was excellent in his analysis of Brexit and its implications for populist movements in Europe. He believes the populist movement has much more room to run in Europe. Natalie Nougayrede, now with the Guardian and former editor of Le Monde, made the case for Europe being able to hold the line until America, post Trump, came back to a world leadership role.

My personal favorite was Cleo Paskal, a Canadian working on energy and environmental issues at Chatham House in England. Cleo's specialty is the intersection of geopolitics and the geophysical – think geopolitical implications of Chinese constructing islands out of barren rocks in the Pacific. Cleo had much to offer and she did it in a warmly self-deprecating way. This Canadian certainly endeared herself to us Americans present when she finished one Q&A in which our present administration had taken some heat by saying that we all should remember and be thankful for how much good America has and will continue to contribute to the world. I could have hugged her for that.

True to good civic dialogue, the conference saved the best for last. Chas Freeman started his diplomatic career as Nixon's interpreter on the famous opening to China in 1972 and finished it as ambassador to Saudi Arabia during Operation Desert Storm. He is the diplomat's diplomat. He sketched great power politics from the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to the present Trump Administration, an administration he dryly termed "a festival of unintended consequences."

Freeman termed the 20th century the American century and asked who will organize the next world order in the 21st. He noted the enormous global investment China is making with its new Silk Road, now termed the Belt and Road Initiative.

He warned the United States to "pull its socks up" and get back in the game. He got a standing ovation. Many of us left Camden determined to "pull our socks up" and make a difference where we can. After all America is a citizen's democracy. It is time for all of us to be heard.

Ron Bancroft

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