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Hidden Reefs: Navigating the Modern Academy

by Peter W. Wood

In 1832, when the American whaling ship the *Mentor*, struck a reef in the Western Pacific near the Palau Islands, the survivors managed to reach a small uninhabited isle, Ulong, and hid themselves in a cave. Their captain was aware of two previous Western ships that had encountered the natives of Palau. An English vessel the *Antelope* shipwrecked there in 1783. The natives rescued the crew, helped them build a new ship, and sent them home safely. In 1823, however, an American whaling vessel, the *Syren*, was passing through the island chain when it was boarded by Palauans who killed two members of the crew and wounded the rest before the invaders could be fought off.

The survivors of the *Mentor* watched with apprehension as a flotilla of Palauans converged on Ulong. Would the castaways be treated like the crew of the *Antelope* or the crew of the *Syren*?

The maritime historian Eric Jay Dolin recounts these events in his new book *The Wreck of the Mentor: A True Story of Death, Despair, and Deliverance in the Age of Sail*, a taut narrative, and perhaps a timely reminder that "settler colonialism" doesn't cover the whole range of interactions between indigenous peoples and Westerners. Only seven of the twenty-two crew members of the *Mentor* lived to tell the tale.

This issue of *Academic Questions* isn't about literal shipwrecks and survivor narratives, but we should never let a good metaphor go to waste. Our opening essay by political scientist Christopher Schilling revisits the perennial debate over the scientific status of psychotherapy. Doubts about Freud's "talking cure" go back to the 1890s but intensified in the 1950s. Defenders of psychotherapy fought back with equal gusto. NAS doesn't have a position on the matter, but we are happy to present a well-argued version of the skeptic's case, especially since it connects with our studies of the "replication crisis" in the sciences.

A study that cannot be replicated is not necessarily wrong, but it has a steeper hill to climb than one that is seemingly confirmed by repeat validations. Schilling observes that doubts about the efficacy of psychotherapeutic interventions are compounded by the

"ideological conformity" that is rampant in the field "where conservative or even moderate voices are almost entirely absent," and where evidence of "negative effects of psychological interventions" are seldom reported or studied.

So are psychotherapists like the Palauans who helped the crew of the *Antelope*? Or are they like the Palauans who feigned friendship to the crew of the *Syren* as a prelude to attacking them? Schilling calls them out on several accounts, including "pathologizing grief" and potentially prolonging it.

The psychotherapeutic professions are not solely an academic enterprise, but universities provide much of the intellectual cover for their claims to legitimate theories of the mind and effective approaches to alleviating suffering.

The Wreck of the Mentor may bring some renewed interest to the somewhat obscure nation of Palau, comprised of 340 islands. These days it is a destination for divers and tourists attracted to what bills itself as "Pristine Paradise Palau." It lies southeast of the Philippines and north of New Guinea, about 500 miles north of the Equator. But if Palau sticks in American memory, it is because of the 1944 battle on one of those islands, Peleiu, often considered the most ferocious engagement of U.S. forces in World War II. The battle pitted the 1st Marine Division and the Army's 81st Infantry Division against 11,000 deeply entrenched Japanese—of whom 202 survived. About 2,000 Americans also died. It was a costly victory of little strategic significance, except perhaps as training for the subsequent U.S. assaults on Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

Our second article in this issue by Lipton Matthews, an independent scholar, argues that democratic nations must shoulder the responsibility to develop and deploy "AI military technologies." We spent some time pondering whether this belonged in our journal. But wars indeed happen and higher education plays a larger role than it often admits. Matthews is mindful of a debate "across political, academic, and technological circles," in which one side calls for holding off the development of "autonomous weapons — weapons that do not a require a soldier to fire them — on the grounds that such development would spur our national adversaries to do the same." Matthews believes such weapons would reduce human casualties and actual costs, as drones are "inexpensive, expendable assets."

Again, NAS is not taking a position in the debate. We are just giving a platform to a view that may not be widely shared on campus. Matthews himself admits that the "ethical case" against such weapons is substantial, but he concludes that the arguments in favor of such development are stronger.

When the crew of the *Antelope* was rescued by the Palauans in 1783, they introduced the natives to firearms, who quickly realized they could be used to conquer neighboring tribes. By the time the *Syren* came by, the natives knew what they wanted, and the wreck of the *Mentor* represented sheer opportunity to gain more arms. The story plays out endlessly in human history. The desire

to obtain deadly power overrides moral qualms and altruistic impulses.

We can easily delude ourselves about human benevolence. When the captain of the *Antelope* made it back to England, he inadvertently "fed right into the then-current craze for idealizing the 'Noble Savage'... uncorrupted by the influence of modern civilization." (Dolin: 70) George Keate, a popular writer and friend of Voltaire, took up the cause in a book titled, *An Account of the Pelew Islands* (1788) in which he extolled "the purest motives of native benevolence."

The question is whether we can really count on native benevolence in any quarter. The next two articles in this issue present a debate between Robert Maranto and David Randall over the merits of a higher education reform agenda that Randall put forward as an NAS white paper, "Systematic Reform of American Education." That paper is available on the NAS website and is recommended reading for the Maranto-Randall exchange. But it comes down to how much state power should be used to advance ideals that both uphold. And that, of course, depends on how much "native benevolence" one can count on among the natives of Washington, D.C. and the various state capitals.

Eric Jay Dolin found rich material for *The Wreck of the Mentor* and he made excellent use of his sources, especially Captain Barnard's long-lost manuscript of his ordeal, which turned up in 1979 in the Kendall Whaling Museum. But Dolin was not the first to mine the story. An American sailor named J. C. Meredith published a novel in 1958, *The Tattooed Man*, in which (according to Dolin) he cast Captain Barnard as the villain, "a weak, pompous man," whose incompetence as a captain brought all the misfortune.

Fixing blame is always a tricky business. Dolin treats Captain Barnard with respect, and we can only guess why Meredith vilifies him. Could Meredith have done any better in the circumstances? It is a question always worth asking about history's second-guessers.

In April, Yale University released its *Report of the Committee on Trust in Higher Education*. The committee's labors were rewarded by a fair amount of positive press. After all, Yale was courageously admitting that the American public has serious doubts about Yale itself as well as most of elite higher education. I was not among the enthusiasts, and put my views in a *Minding the Campus* article, "I'm Grading Like I Mean It." Mainly I took note of the committee side-stepping the issue of the diminished intellectual content of the Yale curriculum to emphasize high tuition, double standards in admission, and curbs on free speech. Those are indeed worthy targets, but they are also distractions from more serious matters.

In this issue, Gene Fendt picks up this thread with a critique of the Yale report that focuses on its paying so little attention to teaching. Moral and intellectual excellence go by the wayside, says Fendt, by the committee's focus on "the best research and teaching for public benefit."

Our next essay turns nearly in the opposite direction. Donald M. Bishop revisits Franklin Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union Address in which the president laid out his "Four freedoms"—freedom of speech, freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom of worship. Bishop observes that America's students have been learning precious little American history. He argues that the Four Freedoms—the speech and the four paintings by Norman Rockwell inspired by the speech—would give American students a much better grounding in why Americans have elevated freedom to their highest principle.

The Palauans were so impressed by the arts of their Western visitors—not just their arms—that they were eager for instruction and even to send some of their own back with the sailors. Education is not just a Western ideal, but the escape from ignorance often crashes on hidden reefs. That's the theme of John Staddon's essay on the fact/value dichotomy in the sciences. He traces the distinction to the work of David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1777), which he notes is under assault by some contemporary thinkers. The critics want to build moral valuations into economics, in particular. Staddon offers a stout defense of Hume's position.

The last of our feature articles in this issue is by Nathaniel Urban, who is a young member of the NAS staff and who draws on his experience as a resident assistant in a university to illuminate some of the ways the DEI ideology persists even in the face of rules and regulations that have supposedly banished it.

We never know if the Palauans who are approaching us come bearing gifts and hospitality, or if they intend to steal our clothes and forcefully tattoo us with the designs they favor. They may also call that involuntary decoration a gift and proof of their hospitality. It is best to keep your own counsel.

This issue also includes an insightful review by James Springer on how the West has met and received other cultures. The Palauans do not figure in Springer's account except by way of deep background. The foreground includes work by Georgios Varouxakis, Jürgen Osterhammel, and Kwame Anthony Appiah, and a biography of the great medieval Muslim scholar, Ibn Khaldun.

We include here a memorial tribute to the evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers and a bright collection of book reviews by some of our best critics. Our poet-not-in-residence, Catharine Savage Brosman, offers her shimmering translation of a poem by Paul Verlaine in which he offers injunctions for writing a poem; the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and her own "Snug Harbor," a riff on some New Orleans jazz that "closes with a low farewell."

Stay seaworthy.

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