

Article V

Small-Picture Dangers, Big-Picture Benefits

When we take a *big picture* rather than focusing on one race, ethnicity, continent, or period of history, we find that deeper down we have common histories. Expanding our everyday narrow view of life to viewing humankind throughout history and around the world links us all. Both our accomplishments as a human race and our failures become shared. Now as brothers and sisters it becomes easier to be honest with each other and to see our common fate as that of the family.

The big picture helps us to see the impact of whatever we do beyond our immediate group, nation, race, religion, or nation. Big pictures enable and encourage us to see systems and cycles.

Every human action like every geological-meteorological activity engenders the proverbial ripple effects. Some actions cascade into tsunamis. When we view the big picture, in fact, we see the interaction of humankind with a larger biological world of plants and animals and even microorganisms and that connected to a geological, meteorological, even astronomical domain. Take away one piece of this picture, say, biology, and we move ourselves back to the Dark Ages.

To use another analogy, we cannot very well guide our group, nation, or world of nations without access to all of the pieces of the puzzle. With only some of the pieces, we are bound to make mistakes. At best, we can only guess or follow instincts about how to proceed in life. The consequences of lack of knowledge and understanding of the coherence of and interrelationships of the big picture can be

monumental for an individual, group, or for humankind itself.

A mighty, but arrogant China in the 19th century, for instance, believed it was self-sufficient and had no need to cooperate with nations outside its millennia-long realm of control. It was soon to be proven wrong leading to internal collapse and colonization by despised foreigners. The Western nations having a more global view, but a disastrous short-sighted, zero-sum view, jumped at the chance to carve up a weak and self-defeated China. The tsunamic consequences of the small-picture perspective today only await the full rage of a tsunamic crash to sweep the world again. Both China and the rest of the world still view the world with narrow, zero-sum, short-term perspectives bound to build conflict and explode in violence harmful to *all*.



The Macedonian-Greek Alexander the “Great,” tutored by the “great wisdom” of Aristotle, did think big. He conquered the territories as far East as the Indus River. But the great treasure plundered and the thousands of lives squandered have left Greece today, the poor

man of Europe dependent on handouts from other nations. The Roman or Aztec Empires, Spain, Portugal, England, amongst many others like them throughout history followed their similar short-term zero-sum mindsets. The world as a consequence has suffered hundreds of millions of squandered lives in slaughter and slavery. The “gains” of the aggressor in each case have been fleeting from an historical big-picture perspective. And the gains, if measured by being surrounded by gold, jewelry, fortress palaces, slaves, pyramid burials, etc., were a narrowing of potential self-fulfillment of “mind and heart.” The perverse pleasure of massacring, torturing, subjugating, and impoverishing those defeated not only brought an end to these empires, but offered a superficial animal existence as a lion let loose in a preserve of de-horned wildebeests.

We may want to rethink our Euro-centric, Euro-America-centric, Afro-centric, Asia- or Latin America-centric studies. Each has similar histories that we can use to unite rather than divide. Can we study cross-cultural issues such as peace strategies throughout history and how they worked or failed? Can we study the human tragedy of oppression of women throughout history and around the world and how it harms us *all*?

On the same note, can we reexamine the glorified concept of “sovereignty”? The attempted solution to feuding Protestants and Catholics, the Augsburg Peace of 1555 granted local princes in the Holy Roman Empire authority to make their domains either Catholic or Lutheran. The partial, short-term fix has become a tragedy for humanity since. Sovereignty gave the princes the right to do with their subjects what they liked. Not everyone in their domain wanted to be Catholic or Lutheran at the behest of the prince. Furthermore, the agreement was that no princely domain would invade any other.

Maybe great for the princes, but the subjects were left out of the bargain.

The sovereignty “ideal” has since been used by modern day princes to such as autocrats Xi, Putin, Lukashenko, et al. to protect their right to imprison, execute, deprive, impoverish their subjects for the benefit of themselves and their cronies. Brazil’s decision to respect the sovereignty of native tribes, likewise does not respect the welfare or personal “sovereignty” of brutally abused women, “useless” handicapped children bashed against a tree or left to starve to death.

Likewise ante-bellum Southern states of the US had the sovereign power to enslave millions of people. Today the respected sovereignty of states allows freedom to restrict voting rights for the benefit of the privileged. Tribal reservations have the right to ignore the widespread practice of rape and female abuse. The Taliban will soon have the right to stone women to death for not wearing the right clothes or for going to school. Slavery is still widespread and culturally accepted in some sovereign nations legally immune from foreign intervention.

We minorities can divide ourselves up at our own peril.

We can emphasize the Holocaust, Armenian genocide, the Cambodian Killing Fields, the Nanking Massacre, etc. – all horrific tragedies, but we might be far better off to see the big picture. We will not win by pleas to remember just our own individual group’s tragedy. Nor will we will by preaching to the choir – those already sympathetic to our plight.

The young people and protesters in Hong Kong, the threatened island nation of Taiwan, the already subjugated Tibetans, the embattled Uighurs, the nations of Southeast Asia whose South China Sea territories are being snatched

without international sanction, or even strong-armed Australia cannot win either individually or even together. The entire world of oppressed peoples and non-oppressed people of conscience must work together to see the big-picture written on the wall. A big-picture positive-sum approach can benefit all – although admittedly a few ultra-rich may need to make some relatively small monetary sacrifices – but maybe with a substantial moral reward.



We will not win by isolating America from the world's problems – as COVID has demonstrated to those of us able to see that big picture. France, Britain, and the US sacrificed millions of lives in many countries including their own by small-picture, zero-sum, short-sighted ignoring of Hitler's obvious evil intentions. In fact, France's vindictive short-sighted, narrow view, self-centered zero-sum punishment of Germany after World War I had led to Nazi Germany's rise in the first place.

Today in America we all need to open our eyes to the big pictures around us. We can ignore history at our own peril. We can accumulate, hoard, and languish in wealth for the few in a pattern that has been the downfall of empires from time immemorial. We can allow others to die by genocide or live in subjugation, because we conveniently take the small, narrow short-sighted, zero-sum view that it's not our business

– until we become the ones subjugated. If you doubt this pattern ask the descendants of the once powerful Lakota, the Comanche, or the Iroquois nations. Or likewise ask the Greeks and descendants of the Ottoman Turks each losing status as big man in the room and now harboring bad feelings still, both left with injured pride and devastated economies. Once well-paid auto, steel, mining workers once fearing competition from newcomers now with a big-picture may see natural allies of other displaced peoples such as refugees, Asian immigrants, and Blacks. Big pictures may short circuit self-inflicted conflict and instead offer common solutions to common needs and problems with better outcomes for us all.



Everything that we teach in schools, preach on holy days, write in the media, spread on social media, we must begin to view and phrase in terms of big picture, positive-sum, systems, cycles, long-term, consequences and unanticipated consequences,

and lessons from our long global history common to all of humankind. Small-picture means a slow, but sure self-inflicted death. Big picture, for those moralists and "soft-scientists" amongst us, also means love and caring for each other. More powerful than hate, violence, and self-engrossment, big-picture love of our brothers and sisters throughout the world can change the world for us and our children.



As part of a statewide effort the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) has awarded a grant to South-East Asia Center (SEAC) to share ideas and provide actionable steps that individuals and organizations can implement for the purpose of promoting better racial understanding amongst diverse community groups.

Through a series of email messages directed to faith leaders, political leaders, educators, and social service providers SEAC will share thought provoking insights designed to discourage zero-sum thinking and instead encourage a deeper understanding of cultural relations that focuses on our commonalities.

In addition to the eight action oriented messages, SEAC will host two one hour online webinars presented by the center’s founder Peter Porr aimed at challenging assumptions, offering cross-cultural insights, and explaining how we unwittingly go wrong in our approach to intercultural interactions.

About the Author Peter Porr



Peter Porr holds degrees in education (Michigan State University), sociology of education (New York University), as well as four

years of doctoral politics of education (University of Chicago). He has trained teachers in Chicago and has taught in classrooms that range from a preschool in Harlem to a college in Viet Nam. As founding executive director of South-East Asia Center, Mr. Porr has served a multi-cultural clientele for some 40 years. Many of whom were historical arch-enemies in their native lands. He is currently an educational and administrative consultant to SEAC while working on a book that examines how education can contribute to world peace.

Mr. Porr had real-life cross-cultural conflicts in his own family that included strict Catholic maternal grandparents and strict Lutheran paternal grandparents who refused to attend his own parents’ wedding. As a German-American gentile growing up shortly after World War II in a predominantly Jewish New York suburb, Peter felt that he was the outsider and learning that being a minority, no matter the circumstances is an experience that imprints one’s soul forever – for better or worse.

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This article is part of an 8 part series by Peter Porr that can be downloaded as an e-book.

SouthEastAsiaCenter.org