

Random Notes

“Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all,” Helen Keller



January, 2015

That Was The Year That Was

In the 1970s, I covered the civil rights struggles in America’s south as a reporter. In the 80s, I witnessed up close wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador. The 1990s found me in Sarajevo immediately after the war.

But absolutely nothing approached 2014 for sheer razor’s edge drama, living as we do five minutes uphill from *Kyiv’s Maidan*. It was exciting, electrifying and chilling, even though I was a mere bystander.

I have never known a braver, more determined people, many of whom lost their lives. With Mad Max armor and sticks for weapons, they overturned a corrupt and authoritarian government with its trained militia, sharp-shooters and heavy weaponry.

Then, when called on, they took the fight to Ukraine’s east.

The world saw—*when we finally got its attention*—what a country could do to change its miserable lot, a country where corrupt officials took up to \$11 billion a year from the nation’s coffers for their baubles and pleasures.



Michael and Olga leading Willard Round Table attended by Renato Rusczyk, General Director of Lactalis; Krzysztof Siedlecki, Country Manager at Astellas; Christos Tsolkas, Managing Director Ukraine, Caucasus, Moldova at Philip Morris International; Iryna Ryabchenko, Fitness Center SOFIYSKIY; Taras Lukachyk, Area Director: Ukraine and New Markets, EE & CA at Kraft Foods; Vladimir Lavrenchuk, Chairman of the Board Raiffeisen Bank Aval; Armen Khachatryan, Senior Partner of Asters; Valeriy Zhaldak, advisor to Sergiy Taruta, ex-governor of Donetsk Oblast and Ambassador Alexander Scherba.

The picture above this article shows the *Willard Round Table* the day discredited President Victor Yanukovich made the decision to turn away from the EU free trade agreement and toward Russia's customs union. It was *Nov. 21, 2013*, and it was a very animated discussion among business leaders.

No one realized at the time the momentous year 2014 would be.

Each Willard Round Table thereafter chronicled subsequent steps of a protest that turned into a revolution, that turned into a Russian invasion, and now a brutal war.

We begin 2015 with a peace that is not a peace, but with a government that, in my view, is the best in my two decades. However, the problems —financial and from self-defense—seem almost insurmountable.

Some years ago I wrote an autobiographical book about my years in Eastern Europe. It was called "*The Optimistic Alien*". I will confess there was a point prior to the revolution I was having second thoughts about all this optimism.

Now I am re-investing in a second pair of rose-colored, but still pragmatic glasses. I hope you do as well. It will take more than attitude, but it's a start.

Tinsel Town and Freedom of Expression

In the US freedom of expression protects writings of religious fanatics, grocery ad copywriters, words on the backs of cereal boxes and, often, pornography and downright trash. It protects, God forbid, Fox News.

It also protects a brain-dead corporation that insists on making tasteless movies. All this is good. *However*, freedom of speech took a hit to the solar plexus as the year wound down.

Unlike Russia, *freedom* to say what one wishes, within bounds (of libel and slander) is protected in the US. Over a couple of centuries, people died for this and other freedoms. It is also a plank in Ukraine's revolution, along with freedom from massive corruption.

That's why I felt cheated when Sony Corp. tossed this freedom carelessly to the wind and refused—at first—to show a silly movie about the assassination of a dictator with bad hair, grits for brains, and a terrible upbringing. The movie was called "The Interview".

The head of Sony says it merely delayed the premiere and now it will have a limited showing. However, his words were merely backfill to hedge against the bad public relations he and the company received.

The show was intended to be a comedy about a plot to kill North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. It is always bad form to base a movie on murdering a current world semi-figure, even one so *cartoonish*.



Kim Jong-un

Sony's PR naiveté that had it backing the movie in the first place was only matched by its stupidity in pulling of the movie due an anonymous threat that this unseen enemy would somehow bring down a 9-11 style tragedy on movie-goers.

For the record, the Office of Homeland Security said this bluster was not a credible threat, though Sony said it took the action to protect its employees and people who might be put in harms way.

Horse feathers. This was Tinseltown at its worst.

Sony, in my view, withdrew the film because it didn't want the folks that hacked into its computer system and unloaded gossip garbage to unleash more gossip garbage. Superstars, agents and production masters were quivering in their Jimmy Choo's.

It capitulated and decided for a limited showing after President Obama made a televised statement saying he was disappointed in Sony's action.

What does this have to do with Ukraine? I think a lot.

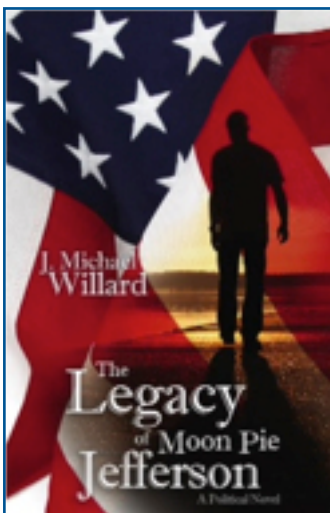
Ukraine is a new nation. It bravely waged a revolution and now is engaged in a war to protect basic freedoms. For a company operating in the United States to so carelessly dispense with its rights in the face of blackmail sets a crummy, black-hearted example.

As if to underscore retreat from freedom of expression, Facebook took down a web page at the Kremlin's request that promoted a mass protest on the day anti-corruption protestor Alexey Navalny is set to be sentenced on trumped up charges.

Facebook simply caved in the blink of an eye to Russian authorities and Sony was prepared to lose \$100 million on the film for fear of being outed by another avalanche of tell-tale emails.

It's as simple, or complicated, as that. Of course, the North Koreans are idiots. Now the movie they didn't want anyone to see will be the most pirated and downloaded film of the year.

The Legacy of Moon Pie Jefferson



I heard you. You said you would like some light, but interesting and exciting *holiday reading*.

May I recommend my “The Legacy of Moon Pie Jefferson”, a political novel that, as John Guiniven, former professor at **James Madison**, a political, PR and journalism pro, wrote: “...*has characters, interesting plot twists and, as with all his books, writing that makes you want to read Willard's other works.*”

Speaking of those other novels, they are “Killing Friends”, “A Thief Wears a Burning Hat” and “Urainia: A Fable”, all available electronically or soft cover from amazon.Com. Also available is the above mentioned “The Optimistic Alien”.

Communicating Messages Effectively

Willard, the company, was pleased in December to spend several days training teams from **Amway**, **IWCK** and **Philip Morris** on issues ranging from media responses to public speaking.

Michael and CEO Olga Willard joined in on the Amway training along with Oksana Gogol and Katya Kalendruz. The IWCK (International Women's Club of Kyiv) training was pro bono to prepare IWCK officials for their annual charity bazaar news conference.



Dmytro Tyutchenko, Daryna Khoroshkovska, Denys Tkachenko, Michael Willard, Elena Yakymchuk, Olga Willard, Svitlana Bogachova, Oksana Gogol

Willard has a long history of working with Philip Morris, participating and leading trainings in Lausanne, Brussels, Moscow and Kyiv.

Have a great holiday, and let's all hope the best for 2015.

*Michael Willard
Chairman, Willard*

Facebook: Michael Willard, Kyiv, Ukraine

Twitter: @michaelwillard

www.twg.com.ua

The Willard Reader www.michaelwillard.org

Handwritten signature of Michael Willard in blue ink.

You can follow Willard on his website The Willard Reader www.michaelwillard.org, and get the latest about his books, his paintings and his songs.