
METZE's MONTHLY ©

Selection of Reading

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www.metze.nl

Metze's Monthly Selection of Reading contains references to, and summaries of, books, reports and articles which the editor considers to be 'interesting reading'. We try, but do not always manage, to update the selection on a monthly basis. Your suggestions are highly appreciated. We also invite you to send your own high quality essays and – preferably investigative – articles for referral or full-text publication.

The Summer Issue:¹ The Middle East, a Chinese Democrat, Hugo Chavez, and the mysterious Antikythera Mechanism

1

Why the Middle East doesn't matter

By Edward Luttwak
Prospect Magazine, May 2007

Edward Luttwak argues that the strategic importance of the Middle East has been systemically overrated. With a humorous bite, he points to the “five minutes to midnight catastrophism”, a powerful tool wielded by Middle East politicians to make everyone believe that apocalypse is imminent; and to the “Mussolini syndrome”, which implies attaching extreme importance to the numbers of army divisions a given regime has, as was the case with Nasser and Saddam, and now Iran, not taking into account the motivation of armed forces. Luttwak makes clear that the importance of Middle East oil has actually declined over the past thirty years, and the last time it was used as a weapon was in 1973. Iran's power of retaliation in case of an attack is not great; and the story about a Persian nationality that massively backs the nuclear program is a myth.

*An illuminating article, available at
http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=9302*

¹ Prepared by my researcher Willem de Jong MA.

2

Letter from Beijing

Remember the democratic movement?

by Jianying Zha
The New Yorker, 23 April, 2007

The protagonist of this warm-hearted story is the author's brother, formerly a true believer in the Cultural Revolution. After Mao's death, he mourned for two years. Then he slowly became disappointed in communism, went back to the city, and tried to start some businesses, without much success. After the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989, he began to see communism as an absolute enemy. Not a believer in slow reform, he helped to found the China Democracy Party, which was, in a mix of naiveté and defiance of authority, publicly registered. He was arrested, sentenced and sent to prison. The author, who regularly visits him, wonders whether her brother is a short-sighted, stubborn fool (which, in a way, he has always been) or the type of martyr that is inevitable in the fight for a democratic future for China.

*This beautiful piece can be read in its entirety on
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/04/23/070423fa_fact_zha*

3

Hugo Chavez: Oil, Politics, and the Challenge to the U.S.

By Nicolas Kozloff
New York, 2006

Kozloffs book is one of the first on Chavez and his Bolivarian Revolution. Chavez, who is a sharp critic of the proposed FTAA, a NAFTA for Latin-America, and is a proponent of a new, 21st century socialism, has been in serious discord with the USA. Diplomatic relations between Venezuela and the USA deteriorated during the Bush presidency.

Kozloff describes in detail how Chavez rose to power and fought protracted battles against neo-liberalism at home and abroad. Due to his focus on international relations and because of an anti-globalist bias, Kozloff fails to criticize Chavez for his increasingly authoritarian style of leadership, his militarisation of society and his attacks on private property. Kozloff does point to alleged subsidies to FARC by the Chavez regime, but stops short of going into the truth behind such accusations. No one believes corruption was absent before Chavez, but since his reign started in 1998 Venezuela ranks much lower on the Transparency International Corruption Index. Reporters without Borders write more critical reports on his regime every year. Kozloffs obsession with the evil of neo-liberal American hegemony makes for a flawed but nevertheless informative and entertaining description of the Bolivarian experiment.

4

The Antikythera Mechanism

Was it the world's first computer?

By John Seabrook
The New Yorker, May 14, 2007

It is generally assumed that technological skills of civilizations before the modern age were, well, not very highly developed. The Antikythera mechanism, saved from a Greek shipwreck in the first century BC, disproves such assumptions in the most thorough fashion. The mystery of the mechanism has completely captured the lives of the scholars working on it - in one case destroying a marriage. Recently, using new X-Ray techniques, many of the characters inside have been uncovered, and after painstaking research, it seems clear that the mechanism was a sophisticated astronomical device. Apparently it had no practical use, other than satisfying intellectual curiosity.

A story of amazement, available at
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/05/14/070514fa_fact_seabrook

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