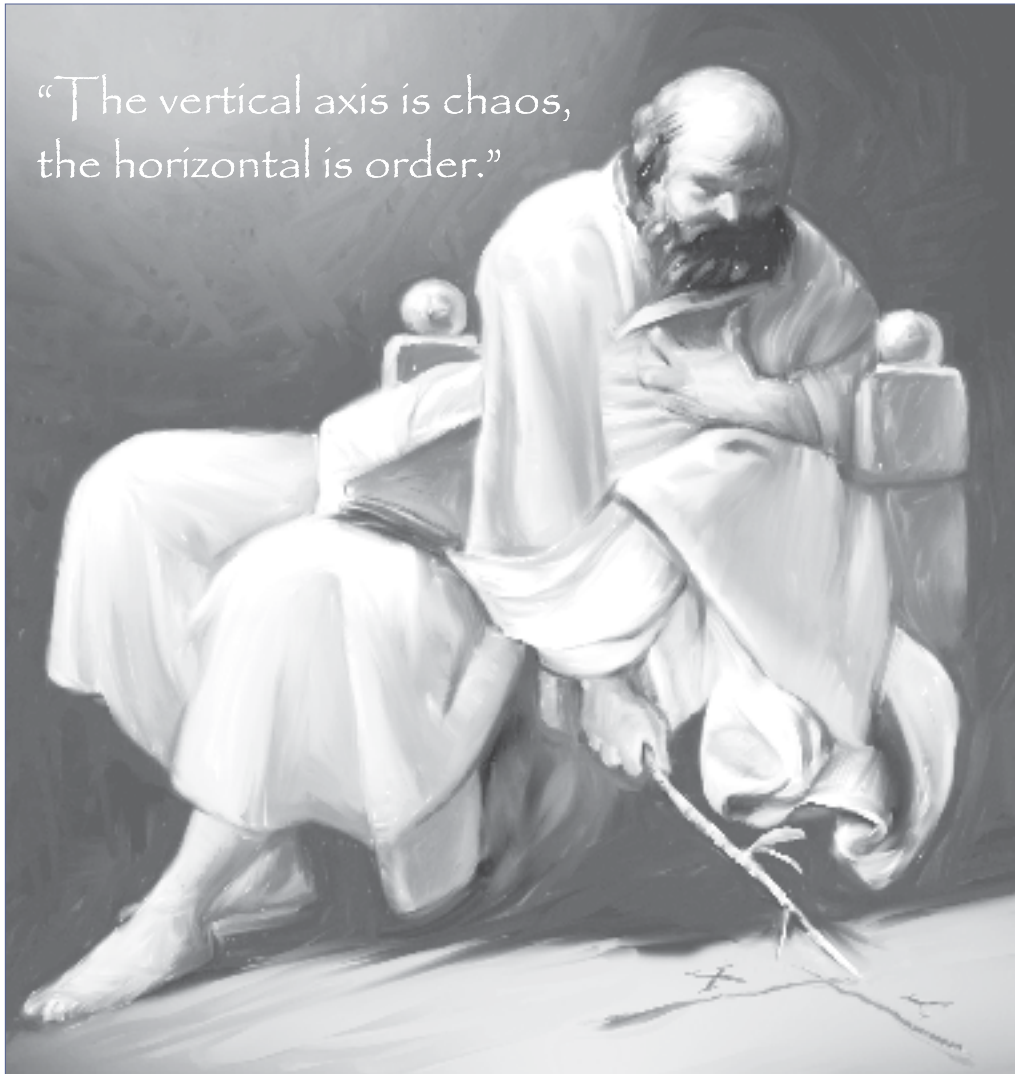


# Socrates in Washington, D.C.

*Maj. Dan Ward, USAF*



to his capital city, instead of the other way around. A screaming police siren quickly dispelled that illusion.

“Hello, Mr. Socrates,” I said, trying to mask my nervousness.

“Howdy,” he replied with a careless wave of his hand. “Call me Ted.”

Before any of us could reply, he jumped to his feet, spun around, and began running up the steps towards Mr. Lincoln, shouting, “Death to the status quo!” For an old guy, he was remarkably spry. Naturally, we ran after him.

At the top, as we tried to catch our collective breath, he explained: “It seemed an apropos shout, given our location. This whole blessed capital region is one big monument to status quo destruction—leastwise, it used to be. Washington himself

Socrates looked ridiculously appropriate, sitting on the bottom step of the Doric temple in Washington, D.C., known as the Lincoln Memorial. Surrounded by other examples of neoclassical architecture, his flowing robes practically blended in. At any rate, he didn’t get more than a passing glance from the pedestrians and tourists hurrying past him. One or two tossed him a quarter, which he received with a mixture of wry amusement and confusion.

As my buddies, Gabe and Quaid, and I approached and saw his robed figure framed by the marble pillars behind him, I briefly wondered if we had been transported back

wasn’t contented with the colonial arrangement, so he fought the crown—in more ways than one. First he fought the crown from overseas, then he fought the crown they tried to give him on this side of the pond. He didn’t want any continuation of the status quo.

“Lincoln—that great defender of the Union, whose homely mug is enshrined here—wasn’t into status quo maintenance either. He set about making a more perfect union, which required shredding the previous order of things, right? That’s your legacy, and it’s your job. ‘Death to the status quo’ isn’t just a catchy slogan. It’s a perpetual mission.”

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For a guy from ancient Greece, he was remarkably well-schooled in American history. We followed him through the columns and stood before Mr. Lincoln's statue.

"Not everyone wants to demolish the status quo, as you well know. There are plenty of turkeys out there, each with a vested interest in maintaining things as they are. Lincoln, Washington, and I were all opposed by turkeys as we tried to destroy the status quo.

"But counter to what you may have heard, turkeys don't fear change. No, no. In fact, they love it. What they fear is criticism, so they come up with meaningless, uncritical changes. They do little reorgs and other silly stuff. It's a desperate attempt to head off criticism, combined with a studious avoidance of any nudge to the old S.Q."

He turned to face us, his blue eyes shimmering like twin reflecting pools.

"But *you* now, you must all seek out criticism. Embrace it. Let it cut you deeply if it's true, and don't flinch. If it's true and you ignore it, you'll suffer much more than if you face it. You can't imagine how much self-induced suffering turkeys experience because they ignore or deny true criticism. The pain of facing reality is much less than the pain of avoiding reality."

"This is all very interesting, sir," Gabe replied, "But I thought we were going to talk about program management. And aren't you supposed to just ask a bunch of questions?"

"Now, now! I meant it when I asked y'all to call me Ted. And program management is exactly what we are talking about. Did you think I was talking about poultry?"

"Try to keep up, son," he added, not unkindly.

"As for the questions, they were really Plato's idea, not mine; and besides, a guy's allowed to change his methods from time to time, isn't he? Or do I need to go over that whole death to the status quo thing again?" We shook our heads mutely, and gestured for him to continue.

"All right then, program management ultimately comes down to a mixture of turkey farming, fortune telling, and taking care of people. All are messy, imprecise arts ..." he trailed off. For several seconds, he stared at Lincoln's marble feet. An awkward silence fell.

Finally, Quaid spoke. "I'm confused, sir ... um, Ted. Turkey farming? I don't ..."

"Oh yes, turkey farming. See, you can't get rid of all the turkeys. They multiply too quickly, and they tend to stick

around whether or not you want them to. The best we can do is keep them from eating all the seed corn and pooping in the water dish. Dr. Jerry Harvey calls it 'Phrog Farming' in his Abilene Paradox book [*The Abilene Paradox and other Meditations on Management*], but it's really the same thing."

My head was spinning, and a glance at my companions showed mine wasn't alone.

"Confused?" Ted/Socrates said. "Good—that means you're paying attention. Did you really think I was going to tell you about some new program management process or give you a checklist? If so, it's been too long since you've read your Plato.

"Processes and checklists can help, lads, but they'll only get you so far. Real wisdom (programmatically or otherwise) is in metaphors, stories, and songs, not in lists and bullet points. Don't take my word for it—ask Plato, Buddha, Jesus, or Bono. None of them ever wrote a bullet-point list in their lives.

"See, the world doesn't need another list of the Top Ten Vapid Platitudes for Program Managers. We've already got plenty of those, and most aren't worth spit. What we need are people willing to live interestingly and who can tell a good story."

The pain of facing reality is much less than the pain of avoiding reality.

We wandered over to the Lincoln Memorial souvenir shop, which suddenly looked more out of place than our robed sage. He took all the postcards off the rack and shuffled them as he spoke.

"In a complex, dynamic environment, rules are for fools with no principles. That's an overstatement, of course. Rules aren't all bad. But when we completely rely on rules instead of principles to direct us, we need a rule for every situation. Taken to its logical conclusion, unless we're living in a simple, stable environment, we end up with one of two outcomes: Either the rulebook gets so long nobody can understand it, or it stays small and doesn't address a significant number of actual situations." He paused. "Come to think of it, that's pretty much the same outcome. Worthless!

"But principles ... ah, a small body of principles can guide us in a large variety of situations, including unique and unanticipated ones. Think of rules as

Think of rules as boundaries, while principles are vectors. Both provide guidance, but a vector is much better. It's a positive rather than a negative, for one thing. It says, "Go here," not just "Don't go there."

boundaries, while principles are vectors. Both provide guidance, but a vector is much better. It's a positive rather than a negative, for one thing. It says, 'Go here,' not just 'Don't go there.' That's a big difference. Do we need both? Sure. But we need principles more, and we need to be able to throw the rules out the window from time to time.

"Ultimately," he continued, "a rule of thumb is better than a rulebook as thick as your thumb, and a pocket full of heuristics is better than a list of them. See, if you check a list, you tend to pick from the top. It's human nature. We all have in-built mental guidelines that say higher is better. But if items of guidance are in your pocket, you never know which one you're going to pull out. You end up surprised, and that's a good thing."

After replacing the newly disorganized postcards in the rotating rack, he leveled another piercing stare our way.

"Let's go check out the Korean War Memorial now." Without a pause, he gathered up his robes and ran down the Lincoln Memorial steps, scattering tourists and poultry alike. As he ran, he sang at the top of his voice. The song was a surprisingly up-tempo rendition of *Send In The Clowns*. It didn't sound half bad.

Among the bronze figures of Korean War soldiers, the lesson continued.

"If we learned nothing from the work of Dr. B. F. Pierce, it's that the humorless stuffed shirt who constantly spouts regulations is always wrong, even when he's right. People like that think they are an asset, but as Dr. Pierce correctly pointed out, they're off by two letters."

He paused. "I take it you *are* familiar with Dr. Benjamin Franklin Pierce?"

We looked at each other and shrugged.

"Perhaps you recognize him by his nickname—Hawkeye? From *M\*A\*S\*H*, you know."

For a guy from ancient Greece, he was remarkably well-versed in American cinema and TV.

"And I do believe it was this same Hawkeye who said, 'If we don't go crazy once in a while, we'll all go crazy.'"

We settled down in the shade of a nearby tree.

"Don't misunderstand. It's not that rules and regs aren't helpful. Heavens, where would we be without our blessed regs? But like the turkeys who love 'em, regs have an irritating tendency to overstay their welcome and overtake common sense, so we need to have some irregs too."

He let out a huge laugh, scattering squirrels and pigeons, then he leaned in and spoke in a low whisper. "Those humorless turkeys, with their overregulated binary worldview, insist on creating order and driving out chaos. They strive to anticipate and categorize everything into neat rows and columns. But chaos and order are actually independent variables, not opposite ends of the same spectrum. Watch closely."

He drew an x-y axis in the dirt.

"The vertical axis is chaos, the horizontal is order. Some people think the only thing you can do is move along this line." He drew a diagonal line from the upper left quadrant to the lower right, representing an inverse relationship between chaos and order. "Order increases in proportion to the decrease in chaos. That's how turkeys think the world works."

Next he bisected that line with a perpendicular one, from the bottom left to the upper right, explaining as he drew, "But the terrible truth is, there's a whole other dimension here. Sometimes you can increase both chaos and order ... and that can be a good thing. Drive out all the chaos, and you drive out all the mystery, all the experimentation, and all the discovery. Drive out all the uncertainties, and you drive out all the life. Leave some chaos in the mix, and the outcome is much better than the locked-down, tightly controlled scenario preferred by turkeys. Then again, sometimes you just end up with a mess. That's always a possibility." He sighed.

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Socrates continued on page 36

“Anyway, Dee Hock explained a bunch of this stuff in his book *The Birth of the Chaordic Age*. Mr. Hock knows whereof he speaks; he’s the guy who founded VISA, you know. Smart fellow.

“You haven’t heard the word ‘chaord’ before? That’s because Mr. Hock invented it. He needed a word to describe an entity that is a mixture of chaos and order, and there wasn’t one, so he took it upon himself to make it. He’s really onto something. I think we’re all chaords, whether we know it or not. Heck, we’re chaords whether we *like* it or not—and trust me, turkeys don’t like it. They pretend the world is orderly and predictable, and they pretend chaos and order are an either/or proposition. They pretend they’re in control. But in reality, it’s like Gnarles Barkley sings”—here he threw his head back and, in a strong falsetto, sang, “You really think you’re in control, but I think you’re craaaa-a-a-zy.”

He resumed his normal speaking voice, “And for what it’s worth, crazy’s not such a bad thing, if it’s the right kind of crazy.” He rose to his feet.

“So as you manage your programs, you’ll have plenty of turkeys offering to drive out the chaos or expecting you to do so. They try to put bad tools in yours hands—tools designed to increase certainty and predictability, to slash risk down to zero, and other nonsense. Don’t you fall for it. Don’t trust those tools much. Some will be helpful in some situations, but use them with care, so they don’t jump up and bite your biscuits.”

For a guy from ancient Greece, he certainly knew some colorful American idioms.

“This 21st century is a strange, dynamic place, full of unpredictable threats and events. And no matter how many regs the turkeys quote, nothing’s going to change that. So open your eyes to the chaords around you—the people and organizations, the situations and needs; they’re all chaordic. So are you. The first step is to recognize that you’re living in Chaordia. Once you grasp that, stuff your pockets with as many heuristics as you can find, and hone up your turkey-farming skills.

“But enough about all this. Let’s go buy some ice cream. Your treat. I wonder if we can find some Ben & Jerry’s around here. I love that Cherry Garcia.”

And so we did.

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