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Op Ed — Little Red Herrings: Giving Thanks

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University)
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Indulge me for a few moments, will you? I write this column just as we approach the Thanksgiving Holidays. You will read it having spent the last few weeks recovering from the Christmas Holidays. It seems appropriate at this time, even conventional, to spend a few moments looking at what we all have to be thankful for, even joyous about. All too often the quotidian cares of life weigh us down unceremoniously, and we forget that we have much to be thankful for. We may focus on the moment and forget what grandness we luxuriate in. Like Sardanapalus (from Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliothecae Historicae*, lib. ii. pp. 78, sq., ed. 1604, though quite possible unhistorical), let us not in our effeminate debaucheries, sunk in luxury and sloth, and forget what a cornucopia of blessings we have before us.

This Blessed Land. How long has it been since you read Richard II? Let me refresh your memory with a longish, but familiar quote:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,—
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

But we could just as easily insert the word "America" for we live in the greatest, freest, economically-sound and most powerful nation in the world. We have much to be thankful for in this regard but please note that this does not say we're a "perfect nation" or a "nation that did not make any mistakes." We have made many mistakes, some of which were egregious. But what other nation has done so much to correct those mistakes? What other nation has been so powerful and yet cares so little about expanding its own borders? I am bewildered at time by those who wish to "blame America first" and treat her as if she were the most jingoist, bellicose nation the world has ever known. Obviously these detractors know very little history.

Greatness. Quick, name three other countries you'd rather live in. I do not mean for you to think of other countries you'd like to visit, but ones in which you'd like to live and move and have your being in. I cannot think of one that offers so much for so little. This nation has used its greatness in a manner that strikes me as unparalleled in history. I am shocked by friends and acquaintances who want to focus on what we have done wrong. We cannot, nor should we, gloss over those wrongs. But we have done so much to amend them. I for one cannot think of another nation that has made such an effort to right those wrongs. Unfortunately one cannot simply wave one's hand and make inequities disappear everywhere and at once, but this nation has done much to accomplish very nearly that. Can you think of another country that has made so much effort in trying to right its wrongs?

Freedoms. Not only is this a great nation, but it is the freest the world has ever known. We luxuriate in freedoms once unheard of. This does not mean that everyone has enjoyed these freedoms fully, at the same time, and to the same degree. But as a nation, we have endeavored to do that as far as is humanly possible. We have much to do in this regard, but what other nation can you name that is even making an effort that is equal to half the one we have already accomplished? Oh sure, some of our freedoms border, and cross over that border, to libertinage, and we must endeavor to curtail these. On the balance, how-

ever, these excesses tend to balance themselves out. We enjoy so many freedoms that some nations may never find themselves ever in a position to take them for granted as we often do. Spend a few moments recounting those freedoms you take for granted: freedom of religion, freedom of the press (despite all our silly political correctness), freedom of association, freedom to bear arms, a right to vote (that, sadly only about one quarter of us ever exercise at one time), to name but a few.

Economy. We are economically sound. If you want to live better than you are, you can if you are willing to work hard. While hard work may take one month, one year or one decade to yield success, it still does this better and more quickly than anything else one may do. Yes, yes, I have heard about GM and a half dozen other ailing or failing companies. But in what other nation can you experience personal economic devastation and yet rise to economic prosperity? Further, we are a generous

people and not only do we provide for those less fortunate corporately, but we also do so privately. I know that we are a nation of haves and have-nots, but we as a nation do more for the have-nots (here or elsewhere) than any other nation in the world. Can we do more? Always! Should we? Undoubtedly! But in all honesty, the glass really is half full in this regard. Our poor are rich compared to other nations while our rich are among the world's most well off.

Moreover, anyone who wants to work hard, take a few risks, and pursue, madly, is likely to do very well by the world's standards. This is not the most important thing in the world, of course, but it is something for which we ought to be thankful. It cannot be done as well or as quickly anywhere else in the world.

Powerful. Uh-oh. Surely this is a point that can be omitted? Did someone mention Iraq? Again, I am undone by those who twit us on this score. Let's take Iraq for example. Only three years ago it was one of the world's hell holes. Today, it is fast becoming a livable nation. Women have the right to vote and hold office and go to school, neither of which they could do before we decided to take out their heinous leader. Hospitals have reopened and water is running in places it never did before. Minorities no longer have to worry about being gassed for, well, for simply being in the minority. Of course there is much left to do, but only in about three areas and much, very much, has already been done. Why is it that the [unable to] **MoveOn.org** along with a number of key Democrats want us to fail? Why do they insist on looking at what is wrong there rather than — at least every now and again — looking at what's right? And what is this silliness now that intelligence was not available or somehow cooked? Look back at the record and you'll see where many keys politicians who said more than even **President Bush** did have suddenly gotten amnesia.

There can be no doubting that we are the most powerful nation on earth. Can there be any doubting that the world — not just us — would want it any other way? Can you think of any other nation you'd rather have in this position? Can you name a nation that uses its armed forces for so much good in the whole world rather than imperialist colonization? Throughout our history U. S. troops have fought and won against the scourges of fascism, communism and now, terrorism. Can you conjure up a country that would have exercised its military might in a manner more becoming of greatness than have we? In all seriousness, can you think of even one nation that you'd rather see as the most powerful nation

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ATG Interviews Gary Rautenstrauch and Philip Blackwell

Blackwell's Book Services

by **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *Blackwell's Book Services has always stressed loyalty and customer service as a priority. But, your online system over the past year, long touted as a big improvement, has not been received favorably in the library community. In fact, it has been unfavorably received. How did this happen and why?*

GR: Not surprisingly, there are no off-the-shelf software systems that deliver the very specialized library services provided by **Blackwell's**. The requirements are so unique, that our systems are basically one-of-a-kind and rather complex. That complexity carries risk, especially at implementation when converting from a legacy system. Our implementation failed. Customers received poor service and the **Blackwell's** employees were devastated by this event. Due to the complexity, it took a long time to recover. But operations are coming back on track and service is getting better every day. We are energized to continue improving and eager to earn the loyalty and customer service reputation back that you mentioned.

ATG: *What are your plans to improve the order and delivery systems that you have spent so much money to put into place?*

GR: At the tactical level, we are establishing measurements, corrective action processes and system enhancements to make sure we continue to improve service, every day. Strategically, we just kicked off a process to guide us for the next few years. Research has begun to help us analyze what's happening with libraries, content, technology, other providers and the general environment in which we all operate. From this information we will build plans

around initiatives we think can provide the most value to academic libraries.

ATG: *Philip, what's the company line on this? Do you agree with Gary's assessment?*

PB: I absolutely agree with **Gary**. But I would like to emphasize a couple of points. Our service standards may be back to pre-go-live levels today, but that is not good enough. We invested our time, money, blood, sweat and a tear to deliver a service that sets new standards in the industry and recognizes the changing dynamics of the market. We have to be faster, smarter and more flexible than ever to meet the evolving needs of the library community and their patrons. Right after implementation we let ourselves and our customers down and that hurt. I would like to apologize for this, but also pay tribute to the Herculean efforts of many people in the business that worked tirelessly to turn things around. We would not be here without them.

ATG: *And, Gary, you have had many great positions, but you haven't stayed in them more than a year or two? Why? And are you that much of a wizard that you can restore a company to normalcy in such a short period of time? How? What's your magic formula?*

GR: I actually worked for my last company for over twenty years. Staying power much like **Blackwell's** 125 years of commitment to education, knowledge and academic libraries makes a difference. There's no magic formula, but success factors usually include a great team, hard work and customer focus.

ATG: *Blackwell's has recently brought in Mark Maloney, formerly of Borders, to oversee the Blackwood NJ distribution center. Why? What kind of efficiencies/changes/improvements do you expect to see as a result of this? Does Mark have a goals and objectives statement in his contract?*

GR: **Mark** brings years of experience in the book business, and even some previous library distribution service. As a professional distribution manager, one of his strengths is facilitating teams of employees to solve problems and meet requirements. His goals and objectives are the same as everyone else's here, to make **Blackwell's** the best supplier to academic libraries.

ATG: *Gary, how do you get along with Philip Blackwell? And, Philip, how do you get along with Gary? How long have you both known each other?*

GR: I've known **Philip** for several years and we get along great, even though he is British. There are times however, when I feel his use of the English language is slightly off, like when we try to talk about football.

PB: **Gary** is a great bookman. His past achievements as a leader and dare I say it a creator of shareholder value speak for themselves and we are lucky to have him. The transition has been remarkably smooth, we speak the same language on business and I and the whole **Blackwell** team have a lot to learn from him. We are having to teach him that true football is played with a round ball though!

ATG: *Gary, since you will have a direct report to Philip Blackwell, will there be more collaboration with Blackwell's UK businesses? In what ways? What is happening to Blackwell's UK businesses?*

GR: I just returned from Oxford. There is a dedicated, talented **Blackwell's** group there and my impression is that collaboration between the business units is good. Although organizations often partner with others to deliver solutions to patrons or customers; it's special to partner with groups with whom you share a common heritage and passion, as the **Blackwell** units do.

ATG: *Philip, can you comment as well? What is happening to the bookstore business, for example? Is Gary involved in that at all?*

PB: **Gary's** focus is on serving academic libraries through **Blackwell's Book Services**, which covers all our library services businesses. It includes a UK-based business unit which although mainly focused on exporting from the UK works closely with our bookstores to serve UK academic libraries. As we speak the undergraduate year is starting in Britain. **Blackwell** stores have a new look, and a sharp focus on incoming students by offering learning aids, special academic purchase plans and expanded inventory.

ATG: *Is Blackwell's Collection Manager the backbone of your service to libraries? Are the collaborative collection development features making an impact on how academic libraries, particularly those in active consortia, determine need and approve purchase? Will both of you please elaborate?*

GR: **Collection Manager** is the gateway to many of our services. Facilitating collaborative collection development is one of its unique and powerful features, used by groups such as consortia. As you know, such collaboration between libraries is not practical in every situation.

PB: We developed collaborative collection development in response to customer demand and it is still a new service that customers are learning to use. Like many new tools it is technically available to use today but the cultural and organizational changes necessary across groups of libraries to get the best out of it will take longer to evolve.

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on earth? Insert a few names and see if it does not take you breath away for one reason or another.

The point of this exercise was not to limn a paean to the U.S. (though someone should at least once a year) but to attempt to refocus our attention on giving thanks, and what we all have to be thankful for. Begin here, where you live. I've mentioned a few things that all of us take for granted from time to time that, upon further reflection, we may now wish to pause and utter a word or two of thanks.

To put all this in Churchillian terms, this purple-mountain majesty, this free-soaring eagle, this amber-grained nation, this America is the worst nation on earth — except for all the rest.