

Thursday, January 25, 2007

China Rising and Obama's the one

Just finished three conversations: First was Richard Cooper of Harvard and former head of the NIC. The main subject was Niall Ferguson of whom Richard had a mixed opinion...loved some things, e.g. arguments around. But thought Ferguson was on weaker ground when he dealt with economics. While talking with Richard, a hand from behind reached out and it was Tom Friedman. We went off to discuss his next column which will be about George Bush cleaning out his desk now that he has been fired last November. And that the Democrats ought to put strong climate change bill and an Iraq bill on his desk, inviting a veto. Then it was Baroness Susan Greenfield, a British biologist with whom I discussed the future of human biology for my upcoming Nature article. She believes the next great leap will be a deep understanding of how the brain generates consciousness.

Then it was off to China. Cheng Siwei Vice Chairman of the People's Congress emphasized the commonalities that China had with all other nations. Pei Minxin of the Carnegie Endowment asked whether China knows what it really wants. Kishore Mahbubani raised whether the competing global visions would shape China. He made the argument that others echoed that China has become a status quo power with a deep investment in the current order. Bob Zoelleck emphasized China's participation in international institutions. Wang Jianshou the head of China Mobile made a surprising point to emphasize the scale. When he started the company, there were less than three million phone subscribers in all of China. Today China mobile has over 300 million customers. William Donaldson former head of the SEC not surprisingly emphasized the rule of law in China and China's political role in the developing world. The moderator Robert Thomson of the Times of London tried to get Kishore to define China as an enemy and a problem. Thomson observed that China will be defined by how the world sees it. Kishore said that was the wrong way to think about the issue. China defines itself through its history. Cheng also emphasized that China must take responsibility for the international system, but only a limited sense given its limited capabilities. He also pointed out that China's trading partners in places like Africa and Latin America are interesting but no where near as important as the US. Cheng was asked by SKY news... "What about human rights?" he replied that they are aiming to steadily increase the scope of human rights toward a much more free society. The next big step will be passing a new bill granting basic property rights to all people.

Also had a brief conversation with Dave Gergen who was sitting behind me about the Obama phenomenon. He thought that Obama was for real but has a big challenge to define himself in substance...so far it is all about authenticity and not issues. And he has until this fall to do it. Interestingly he observed that Obama's biggest rival would be Edwards as the other non Hilary. But his number two at the Kennedy school has just left to join the Obama campaign as the deputy campaign manager.