

IT'S THE JOURNEY THAT MATTERS

If Lost, Return To:

INTERNATIONAL
SCHOOL OF
STAVANGER

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Mr. Quale & Ms. Hulks

Ninth Grade English

Explorations with Nonfiction

It is good to have an
end to journey
towards; but it is the
journey that matters
in the end.

--Ursula Le Quin

TRAVELS WITH CHARLEY

When I was very young and the urge to be someplace else was on me, I was assured by mature people that maturity would cure this itch. When years described me as mature, the remedy prescribed was middle age. In middle age I was assured that greater age would calm my fever and now that I am fifty-eight perhaps senility will do the job. Nothing has worked.

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"PERFECTIONISM"

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and is the main obstacle between you and a bad first draft.

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A WALK IN THE WOODS

We hiked till five and camped beside a tranquil spring in a small, grassy clearing in the trees just off the trail. Because it was our first day back on the trail, we were flush for food, including perishables like cheese and bread that had to be eaten before they went off or were shaken to bits in our packs.

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A journey is a person itself;
no two are alike . . . We find
after years of struggle that
we do not take a trip; a trip
takes us.

--John Steinbeck



Travels With Charley

by John Steinbeck

When I was very young and the urge to be someplace else was on me, I was assured by mature people that maturity would cure this itch. When years described me as mature, the remedy prescribed was middle age. In middle age I was assured that greater age would calm my fever and now that I am fifty-eight perhaps senility will do the job. Nothing has worked. Four hoarse blasts of a ship's whistle still raise the hair on my neck and set my feet to tapping. The sound of a jet, an engine warming up, even the clapping of shod hooves on pavement brings on the ancient shudder, the dry mouth and vacant eye, the hot palms and the churn of stomach high up under the rib cage. In other words, I don't improve; in further words, once a bum always a bum. I fear the disease is incurable. I set this matter down not to instruct others but to inform myself.

When the virus of restlessness begins to take possession of a wayward man, and the road away from Here seems broad and straight and sweet, the victim must first find in himself a good and sufficient reason for going. This to the practical bum is not difficult. He has a built-in garden of reasons to choose from. Next he must plan his trip in time and space, choose a direction and a destination. And last he must implement the journey. How to go, what to take, how long to stay. This part of the process is invariable and immortal. I set it down only so that newcomers to bumdom, like teen-agers in new-hatched sin, will not think they invented it.

Once a journey is designed, equipped, and put in process, a new factor enters and takes over. A trip, a safari, an exploration, is an entity, different from all other journeys. It has personality, temperament, individuality, uniqueness. A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike. And all plans, safeguards, policing, and coercion are fruitless. We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us. Tour masters, schedules, reservations, brass-bound and inevitable, dash themselves to wreckage on the personality of the trip. Only when this is recognized can the blown-in-the-glass bum relax and go along with it. Only then do the frustrations fall away. In this a journey is like marriage. The certain way to be wrong is to think you control it. I feel better now, having said this, although only those who have experienced it will understand it.

My plan was clear, concise, and reasonable, I think. For many years I have traveled in many parts of the world. In America I live in New York, or dip into Chicago or San Francisco. But New York is no more America than Paris is France or London is England. Thus I discovered that I did not know my own country. I, an American writer, writing about America, was working from memory, and the memory is at best a faulty, warpy reservoir. I had not heard the speech of America, smelled the grass and trees and sewage, seen its hills and water, its color and quality of light. I knew the changes only from books and newspapers. But more than this, I had not felt the country for twenty-five years. In short, I was writing of something I did not know about, and it seems to me that in a so-called writer this is criminal. My memories were distorted by twenty-five intervening years.

A Walk in the Woods by Bill Bryson

Excerpt

We hiked till five and camped beside a tranquil spring in a small, grassy clearing in the trees just off the trail. Because it was our first day back on the trail, we were flush for food, including perishables like cheese and bread that had to be eaten before they went off or were shaken to bits in our packs, so we rather gorged ourselves, then sat around smoking and chatting idly until persistent and numerous midgelike creatures (no-see-ums, as they are universally known along the trail) drove us into our tents. It was perfect sleeping weather, cool enough to need a bag but warm enough that you could sleep in your underwear, and I was looking forward to a long night's snooze--indeed was enjoying a long night's snooze--when, at some indeterminate dark hour, there was a sound nearby that made my eyes fly open. Normally, I slept through everything--through thunderstorms, through Katz's snoring and noisy midnight pees--so something big enough or distinctive enough to wake me was unusual. There was a sound of undergrowth being disturbed--a click of breaking branches, a weighty pushing through low foliage--and then a kind of large, vaguely irritable snuffling noise.

Bear!

I sat bolt upright. Instantly every neuron in my brain was awake and dashing around frantically, like ants when you disturb their nest. I reached instinctively for my knife, then realized I had left it in my pack, just outside the tent. Nocturnal defense had ceased to be a concern after many successive nights of tranquil woodland repose. There was another noise, quite near.

"Stephen, you awake?" I whispered.

"Yup," he replied in a weary but normal voice.

"What was that?"

"How the hell should I know."

"It sounded big."

"Everything sounds big in the woods."

This was true. Once a skunk had come plodding through our camp and it had sounded like a stegosaurus. There was another heavy rustle and then the sound of lapping at the spring. It was having a drink, whatever it was.

I shuffled on my knees to the foot of the tent, cautiously unzipped the mesh and peered out, but it was pitch black. As quietly as I could, I brought in my backpack and with the light of a

small flashlight searched through it for my knife. When I found it and opened the blade I was appalled at how wimpy it looked. It was a perfectly respectable appliance for, say, buttering pancakes, but patently inadequate for defending oneself against 400 pounds of ravenous fur.

Carefully, very carefully, I climbed from the tent and put on the flashlight, which cast a distressingly feeble beam. Something about fifteen or twenty feet away looked up at me. I couldn't see anything at all of its shape or size--only two shining eyes. It went silent, whatever it was, and stared back at me.

"Stephen," I whispered at his tent, "did you pack a knife?"

"No."

"Have you get anything sharp at all?"

He thought for a moment. "Nail clippers."

I made a despairing face. "Anything a little more vicious than that? Because, you see, there is definitely something out here."

"It's probably just a skunk."

"Then it's one big skunk. Its eyes are three feet off the ground."

"A deer then."

I nervously threw a stick at the animal, and it didn't move, whatever it was. A deer would have bolted. This thing just blinked once and kept staring.

I reported this to Katz.

"Probably a buck. They're not so timid. Try shouting at it."

I cautiously shouted at it: "Hey! You there! Scat!" The creature blinked again, singularly unmoved. "You shout," I said.

"Oh, you brute, go away, *do!*" Katz shouted in merciless imitation. "Please withdraw at once, you horrid creature."

"F*** you," I said and lugged my tent right over to his. I didn't know what this would achieve exactly, but it brought me a tiny measure of comfort to be nearer to him.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm moving my tent."

"Oh, good plan. That'll really confuse it."

I peered and peered, but I couldn't see anything but those two wide-set eyes staring from the near distance like eyes in a cartoon. I couldn't decide whether I wanted to be outside and dead or inside and waiting to be dead. I was barefoot and in my underwear and shivering. What I really wanted--really, really wanted--was for the animal to withdraw. I picked up a small stone and tossed it at it. I think it may have hit it because the animal made a sudden noisy start (which scared the [heck] out of me and brought a whimper to my lips) and then emitted a noise--not quite a growl, but near enough. It occurred to me that perhaps I oughtn't provoke it.

"What are you doing, Bryson? Just leave it alone and it will go away."

"How can you be so calm?"

"What do you want me to do? You're hysterical enough for both of us."

"I think I have a right to be a trifle alarmed, pardon me. I'm in the woods, in the middle of nowhere, in the dark, staring at a bear, with a guy who has nothing to defend himself with but a pair of nail clippers. Let me ask you this. If it is a bear and it comes for you, what are you going to do--give it a pedicure?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it," Katz said implacably.

"What do you mean you'll cross that bridge? We're *on* the bridge, you moron. There's a bear out here... He's looking at us. He smells noodles and Snickers and--oh, sh**."

"What?"

"Oh. Sh**."

"What?"

"There's two of them. I can see another pair of eyes." Just then, the flashlight battery started to go. The light flickered and then vanished. I scampered into my tent, stabbing myself lightly but hysterically in the thigh as I went, and began a quietly frantic search for spare batteries. If I were a bear, this would be the moment I would choose to lunge.

"Well, I'm going to sleep," Katz announced.

"What are you talking about? You can't go to sleep."

"Sure I can. I've done it lots of times." There was the sound of him rolling over and a series of snuffling noises, not unlike those of the creature outside.

"Stephen, you can't go to sleep," I ordered. But he could and he did, with amazing rapidity.

The creature--creatures, now--resumed drinking, with heavy lapping noises. I couldn't find any replacement batteries, so I flung the flashlight aside and put my miner's lamp on my head, made sure it worked, then switched it off to conserve the batteries. Then I sat for ages on my knees, facing the front of the tent, listening keenly, gripping my walking stick like a club, ready to beat back an attack, with my knife open and at hand as a last line of defense. The bears--animals, whatever they were--drank for perhaps twenty minutes more, then quietly departed the way they had come. It was a joyous moment, but I knew from my reading that they would be likely to return. I listened and listened, but the forest returned to silence and stayed there.

Eventually I loosened my grip on the walking stick and put on a sweater--pausing twice to examine the tiniest noises, dreading the sound of a revisit--and after a very long time got back into my sleeping bag for warmth. I lay there for a long time staring at total blackness and knew that never again would I sleep in the woods with a light heart.

And then, irresistibly and by degrees, I fell asleep.

In a Sunburned Country by Bill Bryson

Excerpt

Chapter 1

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Flying into Australia, I realized with a sigh that I had forgotten again who their prime minister is. I am forever doing this with the Australian prime minister – committing the name to memory, forgetting it (generally more or less instantly), then feeling terribly guilty. My thinking is that there ought to be one person outside Australia who knows.

But then Australia is such a difficult country to keep track of. On my first visit, some years ago, I passed the time on the long flight reading a history of Australian politics in the twentieth century, wherein I encountered the startling fact that in 1967 the prime minister, Harold Holt, was strolling along a beach in Victoria when he plunged into the surf and vanished. No trace of the poor man was ever seen again. This seemed doubly astounding to me – first that Australia could just lose a prime minister (I mean, come on) and second that news of this had never reached me.

The fact is, of course, we pay shamefully scant attention to our dear cousins Down Under – not entirely without reason, of course. Australia is after all mostly empty and a long way away. Its population, just over 18 million, is small by world standards – China grows by a larger amount each year – and its place in the world economy is consequently peripheral; as an economic entity, it ranks about level with Illinois. Its sports are of little interest to us and the last television series it made that we watched with avidity was *Skippy*. From time to time it sends us useful things – opals, merino wool, Errol Flynn, the boomerang – but nothing we can't actually do without. Above all, Australia doesn't misbehave. It is stable and peaceful and good. It doesn't have coups, recklessly overfish, arm disagreeable despots, grow coca in provocative quantities, or throw its weight around in a brash and unseemly manner.

But even allowing for all this, our neglect of Australian affairs is curious. Just before I set off on this trip I went to my local library in New Hampshire and looked Australia up in the New York Times Index to see how much it had engaged our attention in recent years. I began with the 1997 volume for no other reason than that it was open on the table. In that year across the full range of possible interests – politics, sports, travel, the coming Olympics in Sydney, food and wine, the arts, obituaries, and so on – the Times ran 20 articles that were predominantly on or about Australian affairs. In the same period, for purposes of comparison, the Times ran 120 articles on Peru, 150 or so on Albania and a similar number on Cambodia, more than 300 on each of the Koreas, and well over 500 on Israel. As a place that caught our interest Australia ranked about level with Belarus and Burundi. Among the general subjects that outstripped it were balloons and balloonists, the Church of Scientology, dogs (though not dog sledding), Barneys, Inc., and Pamela Harriman, the former ambassador and socialite who died in February 1997, a misfortune that evidently required recording 22 times in the Times.

Put in the crudest terms, Australia was slightly more important to us in 1997 than bananas, but not nearly as important as ice cream.

As it turns out, 1997 was actually quite a good year for Australian news. In 1996 the country was the subject of just nine news reports and in 1998 a mere six. Australians can't bear it that we pay so little attention to them, and I don't blame them. This is a country where interesting things happen, and all the time.

Consider just one of those stories that did make it into the Times in 1997, though buried away in the odd-sock drawer of Section C. In January of that year, according to a report written in America by a Times reporter, scientists were seriously investigating the possibility that a mysterious seismic disturbance in the remote Australian outback almost four years earlier had been a nuclear explosion set off by members of the Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo.

It happens that at 11:03 p.m. local time on May 28, 1993, seismograph needles all over the Pacific region twitched and scribbled in response to a very large-scale disturbance near a place called Banjawarn Station in the Great Victoria Desert of Western Australia. Some long-distance truckers and prospectors, virtually the only people out in that lonely expanse, reported seeing a sudden flash in the sky and hearing or feeling the boom of a mighty but far-off explosion. One reported that a can of beer had danced off the table in his tent.

The problem was that there was no obvious explanation. The seismograph traces didn't fit the profile for an earthquake or mining explosion, and anyway the blast was 170 times more powerful than the most powerful mining explosion ever recorded in Western Australia. The shock was consistent with a large meteorite strike, but the impact would have blown a crater hundreds of feet in circumference, and no such crater could be found. The upshot is that scientists puzzled over the incident for a day or two, then filed it away as an unexplained curiosity — the sort of thing that presumably happens from time to time.

Then in 1995 Aum Shinrikyo gained sudden notoriety when it released extravagant quantities of the nerve gas sarin into the Tokyo subway system, killing twelve people. In the investigations that followed, it emerged that Aum's substantial holdings included a 500,000-acre desert property in Western Australia very near the site of the mystery event. There, authorities found a laboratory of unusual sophistication and focus, and evidence that cult members had been mining uranium. It separately emerged that Aum had recruited into its ranks two nuclear engineers from the former Soviet Union. The group's avowed aim was the destruction of the world, and it appears that the event in the desert may have been a dry run for blowing up Tokyo.

You take my point, of course. This is a country that loses a prime minister and that is so vast and empty that a band of amateur enthusiasts could conceivably set off the world's first nongovernmental atomic bomb on its mainland and almost four years would pass before anyone noticed.* Clearly this is a place worth getting to know.

* Interestingly, no Australian newspapers seem to have picked up on this story and the New York Times never returned to it, so what happened in the desert remains a mystery. Aum Shinrikyo sold its desert property in August 1994, fifteen months after the mysterious blast but seven months before it gained notoriety with its sarin attack in the Tokyo subway system. If any investigating authority took the obvious step of measuring the area around Banjawarn Station for increased levels of radiation, it has not been reported.

and so, because we know so little about it, perhaps a few facts would be in order:

Australia is the world's sixth largest country and its largest island. It is the only island that is also a continent, and the only continent that is also a country. It was the first continent conquered from the sea, and the last. It is the only nation that began as a prison.

It is the home of the largest living thing on earth, the Great Barrier Reef, and of the largest monolith, Ayers Rock (or Uluru to use its now-official, more respectful Aboriginal name). It has more things that will kill you than anywhere else. Of the world's ten most poisonous snakes, all are Australian. Five of its creatures – the funnel web spider, box jellyfish, blue-ringed octopus, paralysis tick, and stonefish – are the most lethal of their type in the world. This is a country where even the fluffiest of caterpillars can lay you out with a toxic nip, where seashells will not just sting you but actually sometimes go for you. Pick up an innocuous cone shell from a Queensland beach, as innocent tourists are all too wont to do, and you will discover that the little fellow inside is not just astoundingly swift and testy but exceedingly venomous. If you are not stung or pronged to death in some unexpected manner, you may be fatally chomped by sharks or crocodiles, or carried helplessly out to sea by irresistible currents, or left to stagger to an unhappy death in the baking outback. It's a tough place.

And it is old. For 60 million years since the formation of the Great Dividing Range, the low but deeply fetching mountains that run down its eastern flank, Australia has been all but silent geologically. In consequence, things, once created, have tended just to lie there. So many of the oldest objects ever found on earth – the most ancient rocks and fossils, the earliest animal tracks and riverbeds, the first faint signs of life itself – have come from Australia.

At some undetermined point in the great immensity of its past – perhaps 45,000 years ago, perhaps 60,000, but certainly before there were modern humans in the Americas or Europe – it was quietly invaded by a deeply inscrutable people, the Aborigines, who have no clearly evident racial or linguistic kinship to their neighbors in the region, and whose presence in Australia can only be explained by positing that they invented and mastered ocean-going craft at least 30,000 years in advance of anyone else, in order to undertake an exodus, then forgot or abandoned nearly all that they had learned and scarcely ever bothered with the open sea again.

It is an accomplishment so singular and extraordinary, so uncomfortable with scrutiny, that most histories breeze over it in a paragraph or two, then move on to the second, more explicable invasion – the one that begins with the arrival of Captain James Cook and his doughty little ship HMS Endeavour in Botany Bay in 1770. Never mind that Captain Cook didn't discover Australia and that he wasn't even yet a captain at the time of his visit. For most people, including most Australians, this is where the story begins.

The world those first Englishmen found was famously inverted – its seasons back to front, its constellations upside down – and unlike anything any of them had seen before even in the near latitudes of the Pacific. Its creatures seemed to have evolved as if they had misread the manual. The most characteristic of them didn't run or lope or canter, but bounced across the landscape, like dropped balls. The continent teemed with unlikely life. It contained a fish that could climb trees; a fox that flew (it was actually a very large bat); crustaceans so large that a grown man could climb inside their shells.

In short, there was no place in the world like it. There still isn't. Eighty percent of all that lives in Australia, plant and animal, exists nowhere else. More than this, it exists in an abundance that seems incompatible with the harshness of the environment. Australia is the driest, flattest, hottest, most desiccated, infertile, and climatically aggressive of all the inhabited continents. (Only Antarctica is more hostile to life.) This is a place so inert that even the soil is, technically speaking, a fossil. And yet it teems with life in numbers uncounted. For insects alone, scientists haven't the faintest idea whether the total number of species is 100,000 or more than twice that. As many as a third of those species remain entirely unknown to science. For spiders, the proportion rises to 80 percent.

I mention insects in particular because I have a story about a little bug called *Nothomyrmecia macrops* that I think illustrates perfectly, if a bit obliquely, what an exceptional country this is. It's a slightly involved tale but a good one, so bear with me, please.

In 1931 on the Cape Arid peninsula in Western Australia, some amateur naturalists were poking about in the scrubby wastes when they found an insect none had seen before. It looked vaguely like an ant, but was an unusual pale yellow and had strange, staring, distinctly unsettling eyes. Some specimens were collected and these found their way to the desk of an expert at the National Museum of Victoria in Melbourne, who identified the insect at once as *Nothomyrmecia*. The discovery caused great excitement because, as far as anyone knew, nothing like it had existed on earth for a hundred million years. *Nothomyrmecia* was a proto-ant, a living relic from a time when ants were evolving from wasps. In entomological terms, it was as extraordinary as if someone had found a herd of triceratops grazing on some distant grassy plain.

An expedition was organized at once, but despite the most scrupulous searching, no one could find the Cape Arid colony. Subsequent searches came up equally empty-handed. Almost half a century later, when word got out that a team of American scientists was planning to search for the ant, almost certainly with the kind of high-tech gadgetry that

would make the Australians look amateurish and underorganized, government scientists in Canberra decided to make one final, preemptive effort to find the ants alive. So a party of them set off in convoy across the country.

On the second day out, while driving across the South Australia desert, one of their vehicles began to smoke and sputter, and they were forced to make an unscheduled overnight stop at a lonely pause in the highway called Poochera. During the evening one of the scientists, a man named Bob Taylor, stepped out for a breath of air and idly played his flashlight over the surrounding terrain. You may imagine his astonishment when he discovered, crawling over the trunk of a eucalyptus beside their campsite, a thriving colony of none other than *Nothomyrmecia*.

Now consider the probabilities. Taylor and his colleagues were eight hundred miles from their intended search site. In the almost 3 million square miles of emptiness that is Australia, one of the handful of people able to identify it had just found one of the rarest, most sought-after insects on earth — an insect seen alive just once, almost half a century earlier — and all because their van had broken down where it did. *Nothomyrmecia*, incidentally, has still never been found at its original site.

You take my point again, I'm sure. This is a country that is at once staggeringly empty and yet packed with stuff. Interesting stuff, ancient stuff, stuff not readily explained. Stuff yet to be found.

Trust me, this is an interesting place.

Cabin Fever

On the runway, forever and ever, with a 2-year-old

By Dave Barry

Sunday, March 31, 2002; Page W48

We set out from Miami early on February 5, two adults and a 2-year-old, bound for Salt Lake City. In a sense, we were following the Mormon pioneers, who trekked to Utah on foot, trudging 1,300 brutal miles over harsh terrain. They had it easy. We had to take a connecting flight through Dallas.

Even on a good day, the Dallas-Fort Worth airport is not traveler-friendly. It was apparently built on top of a warp in the space-time continuum, so no matter what gate you arrive at, you're at least six miles from your departure flight. There is a tram system, but veteran travelers don't use it, because it moves at the speed of a water buffalo passing through the digestive system of a python. Amelia Earhart is on there somewhere.

So as I say, this airport is not convenient on a good day. But we did not arrive on a good day. We arrived when something incredible was happening, something so astounding, so extraordinary, so totally unpredictable that nobody -- certainly nobody operating an airport -- could possibly have anticipated it: snow. In February! What are the odds? Fortunately, the airport had a Snow Emergency Plan. Unfortunately, the plan apparently involved turning all ground operations over to Lucy and Ethel.

So when we landed, our pilot informed us that we'd be delayed getting to our gate. Half an hour later, he informed us, in case we were wondering, that we were still delayed. One hour after that, he informed us that he was now talking to -- this is a real quote -- "somebody who seems to have slightly more of a clue than the person we've been talking to for the last hour and a half." After that, it took us only one more hour to get to our gate.

At that point, we'd been on the plane five hours: two and a half getting from Miami to Dallas, and another two and a half getting the last 300 yards. During this time, we were each given one (one) tiny packet of a gritty substance that was called a "breakfast snack," because you cannot come right out and inform passengers that they are being fed gerbil treats. (For security reasons, airlines no longer serve actual meals, which could be used as nourishment by terrorists.)

Anyway, we finally got into the terminal, and as we hustled the six miles to our departure gate, we were heartened by the fact that the monitors said our outbound flight was now scheduled to leave at 1:41 p.m. "Wow!" we thought, with hunger-weakened brains. "One-forty-one! They have this thing figured down to the minute!"

And guess what? Our plane was at the gate, and we boarded, and they closed the doors almost exactly at 1:41! And then . . .

. . . And then we sat at the gate for four hours. If there is any activity more fun than sitting in a non-moving, meal-free plane for four hours with a 2-year-old, it would have to involve cattle prods.

But finally -- yea! -- our pilot started the engines, and we taxied for about a mile, at which point the pilot stopped the plane and informed us that we would be waiting there for at least two more hours, because there were 40 planes ahead of us for the de-icing procedure, which was apparently being performed by a lone worker with a windshield scraper.

The pilot also said we could use our cell phones. I considered calling the Cyanide Capsule Delivery Service, but my wife, who is more of an idealist, called the airport offices to complain. She finally reached somebody who said, basically, that airport management had nothing to do with managing the airport, and that our beef was with the airline, which I will call "Nacirema Airlines."

So my wife called Nacirema, and was eventually dumped on Consumer Affairs. A person there said this was not Nacirema's fault, because it was a weather problem. My wife said she understood about the weather, but wished to complain about the fact that we'd all been loaded onto a plane without being informed that the plane would not take off for at least six hours, which Nacirema surely knew. The Consumer Affairs person responded that -- get ready -- she would not even record this complaint, because in her view it was a weather problem.

Hey, Consumer Affairs person: Record this.

Finally, a little over six hours after we boarded, the flight took off, and two hours later we were in Salt Lake City. So our trip took 13 hours, of which we spent eight and a half sitting on the ground.

My point is this: If we catch Osama bin Laden, which I hope we do, I don't know what would be the best way to try him, or where the trial should be held.

But I definitely know how we should get him there.