BLL Book Reviews - January 2021

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Keep an Eye on Ivy (Thames & Hudson Inc., 2020) Picture Book (for 3-5 year-olds) by Barrou
reviewed by Nori Morganstein, Youth Services Librarian/Assistant Director

This is a book for fans of John Klassen’s Hat Trilogy. There’s an overall dark sense of humor to the whole thing that will have the right kids smiling and laughing throughout the entire read. They’ll want to yell at the main character, to tell him what’s really happening, or at least point out the ever growing plant.

A boy receives a plant, named Ivy, for his birthday. Each day he has somewhere to go or something to do (like Judo class, playing outside, or doing his homework) so he asks a different family member to watch Ivy. This is after he asks after the family member from the page before. He first asks his sister where the cat is. And she thinks the cat is probably chasing mice. So, he asks her to watch Ivy while he goes to his Judo class. The next day, Ivy is a little bit bigger. And he asks his grandpa where the cat is and where his sister is. His grandpa says he thinks she’s at her music lesson. He thinks that makes sense and then asks his grandpa to watch Ivy. Each day this continues with a different family member, and each day Ivy gets a little larger, and each day another family member disappears.

There are little clues to where everyone is disappearing to. For instance, the sister’s instrument is hanging in the leaves on Grandpa’s page…And on the next page, the boy talks to his grandma and you see the trains his grandpa was playing with in the vines of the plant. Eventually, Ivy gets extraordinarily large, filling up what looks like the whole house, and the boy runs out of family members to talk to. He asks Ivy where everyone is, and there’s a really neat 3-D page where the plant pops out of the book. It all ends with an angry looking family and a disappointed boy, scolding his plant and telling Ivy that everyone will be keeping an eye on her from now on.

Kids will love the 3-D page. It will surprise them because it so unexpected. It was like watching a black and white movie that all of a sudden turned to color. And if they turn the pages the right way, it looks like the plant is opening and closing its mouth; it’s quite a spectacle. Children will want to go back
to that page again and again. The illustrations in general are very cartoon-like and bright. The
expressions on the faces of the angry family members at the end will make everyone laugh. And Ivy, the
plant, is just so impressive and green. Overall, this is a uniquely, humorous picture book. It might be a
little frightening to kids who scare easy. But to those who appreciate dark humor, this will be a huge hit.

**Lincoln on the Verge**

*by Ted Widmer*

reviewed by Doug Wilcock

Abraham Lincoln won the 1860 election while capturing just 39% of the vote. The Union was in
disarray; by December 20, 1860 South Carolina seceded and six more states followed by February 1,
1861. On February 11, 1861 Lincoln boarded a train at Springfield, Illinois that would, over the course
of thirteen days, take him across many of the remaining states of the Union to Washington where he
would be inaugurated as the sixteenth president. It is this trip that is the subject of Ted Widmer’s
excellent history, *Lincoln on the Verge.*

Unlike modern elections in which candidates crisscross the country and make repeated visits to
swing states, Lincoln did not campaign. While the Lincoln Douglas debates from the 1858 Illinois
Senate contest in which Lincoln attempted to unseat Democrat Stephen Douglas gave Lincoln stature as
a rising, articulate voice of the newly formed Republican party and Lincoln's Cooper Union address
before he became a candidate for President solidified Lincoln's positions as the bedrock positions of the
Republican party, he was to a great extent unknown to his fellow countrymen. It was the rail journey of
February 1861 that allowed Lincoln and the people to meet and understand each other. Widmer suggests
that Lincoln's choice of traveling by rail was a masterstroke. It projected a presidential aura, while
bringing Lincoln in contact with the people; it restored their confidence in democracy by showing a
firm, implacable purpose; and it symbolized a new era.

Thousands witnessed the decorated train as Lincoln travelled from city to city. Wherever he
stopped he and his party were mobbed, often at great peril. As the trip wore on Lincoln wore down from
all the vigorous handshaking he did. His voice receded to a whisper as he gave speech after speech. But
throughout it all he spoke to the people, establishing "a current of electrical communion" that cemented
the bond he would need to hold the Union cause together through the war that quickly ensued. When
Lincoln left Springfield he delivered a short nine-sentence speech that set the tone for his trip and for
what the people could expect of his administration. He expressed hope and humility, suggesting that" without the assistance of the Divine being who ever attended [George Washington], I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will be well."

By 1860, the United States, with 3% of the world's population had ½ of the world's rail mileage. It
allowed a westerner like Lincoln easy access to the older Eastern states and it provided quick movement
of people and goods around the country. But traveling by rail also illustrated the stark divide between
the Northern states and therecently seceded Southern ones. Jefferson Davis also rode by train from his
Mississippi plantation to his inauguration in Montgomery, Alabama but his was a disjointed trip across
many rail lines with mismatched gauges. A direct rail link between Jackson, the closest Mississippi city
to Davis's home, and Montgomery did not exist.

Washington D.C. was at the time a Federal island in a sea of Southern sympathizers. That Lincoln
needed to reach Washington unharmed was symbolically essential to the Union cause. If he could not
control his own journey, how could he possibly restore order to a huge nation? It would not be easy. At
times it reads like a thriller as Widmer delineates the heroic efforts of individuals who infiltrated groups
centered in Baltimore who were intent on assassinating Lincoln, showing how the risks these undercover
men and women took provided the intelligence to help secure his safe arrival.

After Lincoln's death Ralph Waldo Emerson described why the trip had been so important. "The
president stood before us as a man of the people," for "he had a face and a manner that disarmed
suspicion, which inspired confidence, which confirmed good will." Widmer concludes that Lincoln left
Springfield " as the head of a party that was barely in control of the mechanics of governance; he arrived
in Washington as a genuine president-elect."
As we endure our own tumultuous times this book will inspire and console us. Ted Widmer has given us a masterpiece.
It was a century ago that the United States and the world underwent one of the worst pandemic in history. The magnitude of the Influenza pandemic was greatly enlarged by the timing of its arrival in the midst of WW I. The war started in 1914 but the United States did not become a belligerent until April 1917. The pandemic was thought to have begun in Haskell County in western Kansas during the winter of 1918. It quickly spread to Fort Riley also in Kansas. The rapid recruitment and transfer of military recruits between military bases greatly enhanced the spread of the virus across the nation. A local hot spot in Massachusetts was Ft. Devens in the north-central part of the state. The flood of American troops into the European War Zones brought the disease to other parts of the World. The major combatants in the war employed strict wartime censorship. It was when the influenza reached Spain, a non-combatant, that the world became aware of the pandemic: hence the expression, the Spanish Flu.

The initial wave of the pandemic striking in the spring of 1918 was relatively mild with a low fatality rate. However the second wave in the fall was deadly with many areas being struck and peaking in a period of several weeks in October and November. One feature of this particular pandemic was that it tended to strike younger individuals in their 20s and 30s. The progress of the disease was rapid, frequently causing death within a few days. Some cities in the US were particularly hard hit such as Philadelphia. Hospitals were overwhelmed and many sick individuals could not be admitted and entire families would die at home. The death rate was so high that many mass graves were dug using steam shovels to keep up with the fatality rate. Another feature of the pandemic was the difficulty that the medical and scientific community had in getting the political leaders to take the crisis seriously and take steps to inhibit the spread. The military requirements during wartime took precedence over any health concerns.

In 1919 and 1920 there were further waves of the epidemic but the virulence declined and the devastation of earlier years was not repeated. One prominent additional victim in 1919 was President Woodrow Wilson who was attending the Versailles Peace Conference ending WW1. It has been thought that the effect of the disease on the president tended to stifle his opposition to the very stiff penalties that his allies wanted to inflict upon Germany. These very strict restrictions on Germany have been thought to be a major factor in the rise of Adolf Hitler a decade later. There is much uncertainty on the final death rate of this pandemic. World wide the lowest figure cited is 50 million with other estimates exceeding 100 million. The US total is considered to be about 3/4 of a million.

The Great Influenza is very well written. The author covers the history of pandemics through the years and the gradual medical awareness of their causes. Much of this advance had occurred only in the fifty years preceding the 1918 pandemic and was won against the obstructions created by much of the medical establishment. Pioneering individuals such as Snow, Pasteur, Lister, Koch, Gorgas determined the causes and potential cures of many of these endemic diseases and led the way for the Public Health structure that exists today. In the U. S. the CDC (Center for Disease Control) and worldwide WHO (World Health Organization) have been instrumental in protecting our society from diseases year in and year out. These groups can only be effective when they get the support of the political establishment and pandemic control requires that support. Books like The Great Influenza are so important in raising awareness of and the necessity for these health organizations in the current battle against infectious diseases in a world where virtually any part of the globe is only a day away from any other part.

Today we are in the grips of another influenza pandemic. So far the fatality rate has been less than the pandemic we experienced a century ago, but that pandemic also started off mildly. The Great Influenza was written in 2004. The author states: “So even with all of the medical advances since 1918, the CDC estimates that if a new pandemic virus strikes, then the U. S. death toll will most likely fall between 89,000 and 300,000”. At present (July 21, 2020) the current Covid - 19 number of deaths in the United States has reached 143,875 and we are still in the first wave with new cases still rising. (As of December 22 the U. S. Death rate reached 330,000)
American Dirt
by Jeanine Cummins (386 pages, 2019)
reviewed by Stuart J. Bassin

The cover of this current best-seller describes the novel as “The Grapes of Wrath for our times.” This is strong praise for American Dirt which is backed up by many awards, months on the New York Times Best Seller List, and repeated discussions through Oprah’s Book Club. The books do have similarities. John Steinbeck’s classic told the tale of poor Okies forced to leave their homes in the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression and risk everything in the hope that they can find a better life in California. American Dirt follows a comparable trajectory, following Mexican migrants forced to leave their homes in hopes of finding a new home in the United States. Both novels provide compelling narratives which illuminate important but little understood historic events. Along the way, they teach us a lot about human nature, demonstrate the fragility of our lives, and capture the challenges encountered by people living on the edge.

In the opening pages of American Dirt, we meet Lydia and her eight-year old son, Luca. They are the sole survivors of an extended family which is murdered by a vicious Acapulco drug cartel after Lydia’s husband publishes a newspaper expose about the cartel. Realizing that the cartel wants them dead and that the cartel has powerful friends throughout Mexico, Lydia and Luca begin a desperate effort to escape. They quickly learn that their stable middle-class life is over and that their only hope for survival is to join distant relatives in the United States—1600 miles away.

With little more than their own wits, they join the army of desperate Mexican migrants hoping to find a better life far away in the United States. Like thousands of other poor migrants, they stow-away on “La Bestia”—the inter-city freight trains which are the only available transportation. Along the way, they must hide from the cartel, evade corrupt immigration police, protect themselves from the violent criminals who prey on the migrants, and confront the brutal elements. They discover the strange and dangerous ways of the road, learn to distinguish potential friends from deadly adversaries, dodge corrupt officials who brutalize and rob the migrants, and see other migrants die almost instantly when they fall from La Bestia and are crushed by the train wheels. They confront former friends who turn their backs on the victims, meet generous parish priests and kind strangers who provide the migrants with occasional food or shelter while warning them of the hazards they will face in their travels, and form relationships with fellow travelers who have endured their own gruesome trials. Some survive, some are beaten and robbed, while others die along the way.

Obviously, the novel is not a light read, but it is a compelling story well told. As with The Grapes of Wrath, we obtain an intimate picture of a bleak world we can barely imagine while obtaining occasional glimpses of the good in humanity. The novel provides a multi-faceted perspective on the migrants far more sophisticated than the stereotypes and caricatures we see in the media and public debate. At times, the reader seeks a respite from the horrors which permeate the novel, but is drawn back by the compelling decency of the characters and the reality of the story. We all root for Lydia, Luca, and their friends to experience some good fortune and are occasionally rewarded. We come away emotionally exhausted, but grateful for the reading experience.

One persistent concern kept returning to this reviewer’s mind. “Is the novel authentic?” “Does it accurately portray the reality of the world of Mexican migrants?” The author’s notes describe the research underlying the story, but the fact remains that the author is an American novelist based in New York who does not appear to have lived or traveled extensively in Mexico or the border areas. I cannot offer a definitive answer to this concern, but observe that other reviewers have not criticized the novel’s accuracy more than one would typically expect from any historical novel.

More critics have raised issues of “cultural misappropriation” with regard to the novel, questioning whether a Caucasian American is the appropriate author of a novel about a uniquely Mexican experience. It is true that Latino authors are under-represented on the book shelves and that it would be better if we read more works by Latino authors. But, any book must ultimately stand on its own merit regardless of the author’s heritage. Measured against that standard, American Dirt is a great achievement which our children and grandchildren will read in years to come.
The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family and Defiance During the Blitz
by Eric Larson
reviewed by Jim Mills

The Splendid and the Vile tells the story of the first year of Winston Churchill’s tenure as British Prime Minister beginning on 10 May 1940 only eight months after the start of the Second World War. Churchill had been a fixture on the British political scene for close to forty years before 1941. The day that he became the Prime Minister, following the resignation of Neville Chamberlain, Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands and Belgium leading to the fall of Britain’s major ally, France, within a few weeks. Churchill described his feeling on his elevation to the Prime Ministership: “At last I had the authority to give directions over the whole scene, I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all of my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial…”

And a trial it was to be. Almost immediately upon assuming office Churchill had to deal with the massive problem of evacuating the British Expeditionary Force from France after it was encircled by the German Army. Over a nine day period 340,000 troops were successfully retrieved and brought across the English Channel by a flotilla of ships. In the following months the Battle of Britain began. For most of the year the British were preparing for an expected German invasion. The Germans realized that they had first to defeat the RAF (Royal Air Force) prior to any invasion. A historic air battle was conducted during the summer months over Britain. Britain’s ability to manufacture a record number of fighter aircraft that summer and the skill and pluck of British aviators blocked that goal and Hitler was forced to call off an invasion of Britain that fall. Following a British bombing raid on Berlin, the German’s redirected their aerial assault towards British cities and the Blitz began. The bombing of Britain continued until the D-Day invasion of France in 1944 but the worst of the assault ended in 1941.

With the fall of France, Britain and the British Commonwealth were the lone opponent left to challenge the triumphant German Empire. Virtually all of the leading British politicians were willing to end the war leaving Germany dominant on the European continent. All that is except for the new Prime Minister. Churchill’s leadership and oratorial skills gradually brought the nation around to his view on continuing the war over the next year. While bucking up the British resistance, Churchill’s other major task was influencing America’s President Franklin Roosevelt to help Britain’s war effort and to eventually enter the war on Britain’s side. Britain’s lonely and seemingly hopeless role as Germany’s only opponent was to end in 1941. In June Hitler decided to invade the Soviet Union making Russia a new British ally. In December the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and America was also Britain’s ally. The war would continue for another three and a half years but a route to eventual victory was now finally in view.

Larson also tells the story of life in wartime Britain, more specifically in London. One device he uses is the experiences of Churchill’s children. His youngest daughter, Mary, was in her late teens and the author describes her social and romantic interests. Young people attempted to maintain their normal lives during the blitz. The saga of Churchill’s son, Randolph, and his wife, Pamela, provides another story with his drinking and gambling problems and the impact on his wife and child. Two other key players in the Churchill story at the time were two visiting Roosevelt aides, Harry Hopkins and Averell Harriman. Harriman showed a romantic interest in Pamela even though he was married at the time. It wasn’t until the 1970s, long after the war and Harriman’s stint as governor of New York, that they eventually married. Two other major characters in the story are Lord Halifax and Lord Beaverbrook. Halifax was Churchill’s major competitor to become Prime Minister and was both Chamberlain and King George’s first choice, but Halifax declined the offer, certainly instigating a major turning point in British wartime prospects. Beaverbrook was named by Churchill to be in charge of aircraft production and his Herculean efforts in providing aircraft to the RAF was key to Britain’s survival.

The story of wartime Britain and Churchill’s inspirational efforts to motivate his people is a story told many times. Larson concentrates on Churchill’s first year which was the crucial year for Britain. Later in 1941, Britain’s survival was assured with the acquisition of two new powerful allies. At the time this turn of events could not have been anticipated and Churchill persevered despite having no assurances that his efforts would be successful. It is this uncertainty and this perseverance that provides the drama to this period of British history and to the Churchill legend. Upon taking power Churchill expressed that spirit better than anyone else: “Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, ‘This was their finest hour.’”
Empires of the Sky: Zeppelins, Airplanes, and Two Men’s Epic Duel to Rule the World
by Alexander Rose
reviewed by Jim Mills

Today, with the exception of a few advertising blimps and hot air balloon festivals, lighter than air airships no longer exist. However in the 1920s and 1930s it was an open question whether airships or aircraft represented the future of air travel. Lighter than air rigid airships known as dirigibles (in Germany zeppelins) had a very short era of dominance from 1900 to 1937. Blimps, unlike dirigibles, are not inherently rigid and derive their shape from gas pressure.

In the early years the main promoter of dirigibles was a German, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin. As a correspondent, Zeppelin visited Union Army camps during the American Civil War where he saw the use of tethered balloons used for observation. His enchantment with lighter than air vehicles was to dominate the rest of his life. The primary problem with ballooning was that there was no control over the flight path with the flight directions determined by the prevailing winds. Any attempt to control the flight path was limited by the lack of light weight engines for propulsion. Steam engines were tried but were much too massive. The work of Gottlieb Daimler in the 1880s and 90s resulted in the development of light weight internal combustion engines allowing the dream of controlled air flight to become a reality. Another technical advance was the availability of inexpensive aluminum to provide the necessary light weight structure.

The first primitive dirigible flights took place in 1900 and by 1908 technology had advanced sufficiently to allow scheduled commercial airship flights within Germany and eventually around Europe and to Africa. Zeppelin had become a celebrity with his name becoming the name used for German dirigibles. With a military background Zeppelin’s main interest in dirigibles was as a military weapon. There had been keen anticipation that they would dominate any future war. In WW I numerous zeppelins were used as bombers making numerous flights over Great Britain. Inflated with inflammable hydrogen, the massive zeppelins made very good targets and their use as bombers was an acknowledged failure. It was the much smaller faster aircraft used along the battlefronts in France that were to have the greater impact.

Count Zeppelin did not survive the war. The rest of the book deals with the competition between airships and airplanes represented by the Zeppelin Corp.’s Hugo Echener and the American Pan-Am Corp’s Juan Trippe. By the 1930s the first tentative zeppelin flights were made from Germany to America (Lakehurst, NJ) and Pan Am was flying airplanes from the U. S. to the Caribbean and Latin America. Other attempts by Pan Am to provide air service across the Pacific involved an immense investment with frequent island hops required and were not economically rewarding.

The attempts to develop dirigibles in other countries such as Great Britain and the U. S. were much less successful than the German efforts despite the use of non-flammable helium in the U. S. The era of the dirigibles came to a sudden end in May 1937 when the latest zeppelin, The Hindenburg, burst into flames after crossing the Atlantic while landing at Lakehurst, NJ. The incident, which caused dozens of fatalities, was ruled to be an accident brought about by a series of events including thunderstorms in the area at the time and of course the flammability of hydrogen gas. Even if the air disaster had not occurred, the days of commercial lighter than air ships were numbered. Airships could only carry far fewer than 100 passengers and were able to operate due to their novelty and the willingness of very well to do passengers to pay the premium required to fly in a dirigible. During their time dirigibles provided a luxurious travel experience rivaling the great cruise liners of the day. The author, Alexander Rose, has provided a fascinating and very readable history of the airships, an era with which this reader was not too familiar. Airships are gone today but in the era of jammed commercial air travel we only can revel in the luxurious air travel options available to a past age.

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To Start a War: How the Bush Administration Took America into Iraq
by Robert Draper
reviewed by Jim Mills

To Start a War tells the story of the George W. Bush Administration decision making process that led to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. There had been many Republican policy makers who had been disturbed by the fact that during the first Gulf War in 1991, that liberated Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion, that the first Bush administration did not also invade Iraq and depose the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. In 1998 the elder Bush and his National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, wrote A World Transformed in which they explained why they did not invade Iraq. They pointed out the nasty repercussions in the Middle East and in Iraq if they had done so. They fairly accurately spelled out the problems that the younger Bush would encounter following his 2003 invasion. One of the leading proponents of invading Iraq was Paul Wolfowitz who became an Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in 2001 in the second Bush administration. That year on 9/11 the Al Qaeda terrorist attack on America acted as a catalyst in driving many in the administration in their promotion of an Iraqi invasion.

The first response of the government was to invade Afghanistan where Al Qaeda had been harbored at the time of the attack. This military operation there proceeded quickly with the governing Taliban authority being deposed and most of the Al Qaeda forces including its leader, Osama bin Laden, escaping from the country. Before the U.S. had consolidated its position in Afghanistan and completed the destruction of Al Qaeda, the attention of U.S. Forces was diverted to Iraq. The next year was devoted to providing a justification for the desired U.S. attack on Iraq. Initially the Bush administration tried to demonstrate a tie between Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and the Al Qaeda terrorists. Despite continual efforts by many in the Department of Defense to promote such a tie, no such tie was conclusively proven. A second potential reason for invasion was Iraq’s presumed possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.

Many such potential lines of evidence were pursued in trying to establish this threat. The intelligence briefings from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other intelligence sources failed to provide the information that the administration was seeking. Time after time the briefings were rejected and the agencies were told to rethink their message. Slowly these agencies came up with different wording to their presentations to make the Iraqi possession of these weapons seem more likely. The forces pushing this view include Wolfowitz, the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld and the Vice President, Dick Cheney. Opposition within the government included the Secretary of State, Colin Powell, the National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice and many of the military hierarchy.

Most of America’s allies, with the major exception of Great Britain, opposed an Iraqi invasion and refused to support the U.S. effort. In order to get United Nation’s support the U.S. agreed to allow U.N. Inspectors to make a ground search for the alleged WMD in Iraq. After several months scouring the country with the co-operation of Iraq no such weapons were found. The Bush administration grew impatient with these delays and in March 2003 proceeded with the invasion of Iraq. This military attack went well with most Iraqi resistance crumbling. Once the country had been occupied the U.S. Government found itself with no plan to provide a workable replacement for Saddam’s rule. The country quickly fell into a chaotic state and with the rise of a major insurgency U.S. troops were required to remain as a fighting force in Iraq for many years. As Colin Powell had told Bush, “If you break it you own it.” After an exhaustive search no Weapons of Mass Destruction were found and no ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda have ever been established.

The Al Qaeda terrorist attack on America resulted in 2,977 American deaths. The decision by George W. Bush to invade Iraq resulted in the loss of over 4,400 American lives, over 32,000 Americans injured and over 300,000 cases of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among American soldiers. Iraqi losses from the war totaled 405,000 deaths and the cost to the U.S. taxpayers totaled two trillion dollars. Prior to the invasion, Iraq was a counter balance to the power of neighboring Iran. Today a Shiite run Iraq has much closer ties to Shiite Iran greatly enhancing Iran’s power in the Middle East.

The author, Robert Draper, has provided a detailed, scrupulously researched account of this regretful period in American history. In summing up George Bush’s role during this period the author notes: “But the architecture of his errors now loomed over Bush’s presidency. It was he who had selected Donald Rumsfeld, who had been out of government for a quarter of a century. It was he who had been insufficiently attentive to the threat posed by Osama bin Laden. It was he who internalized the evidence-free claims by Paul Wolfowitz and others that Saddam likely had a hand in the 9/11 attacks. And then, it was he, above all others, who promoted the spectacle of the Iraqi dictator handing over his
imaginary weapons to a group of terrorists so as to fulfill the imaginary ambition of destroying America. It was the president’s imagination that had run fatally wild.” A crucial lesson from this period and these events is the destructive effects of a pre-set mind and the rejection of evidence that conflicts with that state of mind. Any leader must have the flexibility to hear all points of view and have the courage and determination to follow the evidence and make use of that evidence in the decision making process. A closed mind have ruined many a leader at the expense of the leader’s people.