

The Dead Hand and the Living Will



[Opening theme music.]

Joel McKinnon

Hi, friends. Welcome to another interim edition of Seldon Crisis at the midpoint between formal episodes telling the grand story of Foundation. Since deciding to go with a four week cadence between storytelling episodes, I've been giving some thought to how to make use of these midway updates. Truth be told, I'm releasing something every two weeks, partly to keep your ears occupied, but also because I just love the feeling of releasing an episode every other Friday. If you're not interested in hearing anything but the story itself and hopefully my accompanying commentary, feel free to skip these interim episodes.

Joel

You'll know, by the title if it's a story episode, if it has the name of a section of the books, followed by a part number. My plan for the next three formal episodes, for instance, is to title them "The Mule parts I, II and III." I'm still playing with some ideas on these informal episodes. I might have an occasional guest on to talk about their perspective on Foundation, something like the episode six discussion with Nathaniel Goldberg on the Philosophy of Foundation, but probably a bit shorter. Other times, I might just want to share some extended thoughts of my own, and I'll probably want to talk about the upcoming show from Apple TV.

Plus, starting in only a few weeks this week I want to reflect upon the central theme of our last two episodes, which was called into focus with a few lines of dialogue between Ducem Barr and General Bel Riose. About halfway through "The General, part I," Riose is indignant at the suggestion that psychohistory can predict which battles he will win or lose and that he is merely some "silly robot." Barr responds by telling him the particulars are not important. It is the larger sweep of human behavior that guarantees his defeat. Riose wants to know why he can't just use his free will to defeat Seldon's predictions, and Barr's response foretells the conclusion of the war.

Ducem Barr

"Attack now or never with a single ship or all the force in the Empire, by military force or economic pressure, by candid declaration of war or by treacherous ambush. Do whatever you wish in your fullest exercise of free will. You will still lose."

Joel

Of course, Riose is not convinced and executes his war with all the brilliant strategy at his command, but his free will is defeated by the so called "goddess of psychohistorical necessity." If there was a flaw in the plot of "The General," to me it was that the story was essentially over at this point, not even halfway through the chapter.

All of the frantic activities, violence, and deception that followed were entirely futile. The war was already over, and no one knew it except for Ducem Barr, and even he seemed to forget it for quite a while in the story. And then he seems to remember at the end how psychohistory works. It had played out exactly as he had foretold. The actions of individual men such as Riose, Brodrig, Barr, and Devers, didn't affect the outcome in the least. Psychohistorical determinism prevailed and proved that in this

universe, at this time, there was essentially no such thing as individual free will.

Back in our own universe. In the mid 19th century, a Scottish philosopher named Thomas Carlyle proposed what he called the "Great Man" theory of history, which posited that history was defined by the decisions and actions of a few great men, who, it turns out, were mostly those of European descent and, as the name of the theory suggests, exclusively male. The theory rested upon two assumptions. One, every great leader is born already possessing certain traits that will enable them to rise and lead on instinct. And two, the need for them has to be great for these traits to then arise, allowing them to lead.

Note that this theory largely dismisses the decisions and actions of artists, writers, scientists and, of course, women. History is defined by the Bel Rioses, not the Hari Seldons, nor their wives and mothers that nurture and sustain them. Those presumably vital characters that Asimov, unfortunately, leaves out of his story, at least to this point in the epic. Even in Carlisle's time, the Great Man theory had its detractors, notably among them, a man named Herbert Spencer, who summarized his opposition in his landmark thesis, *The Study of Sociology*. "You must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears and the social state into which that race has slowly grown. Before he can remake his society, his society must make him."

Here we have a century before Asimov wrote "Foundation," the framework of the battle between the dead hand of Hari Seldon as expressed by Ducem Barr, and the living will of General Bel Riose. After Spencer, historians seem to largely settle on the side of Carlisle, not Spencer. And that is why our historical tomes and books have for so long been full of the names of kings and emperors and the battles that brought them to power. And

relatively little attention is paid to the cultural and sociological context within which these heroic figures operated.

We're so indoctrinated into this belief that we still take it for granted that without figures like Caesar and Augustus, Napoleon and George Washington, we would have a far different reality than we now inhabit. How much do we know of their familial influences, their cultural moors and attitudes? Only those who delve deeply into their biographies know much in this regard. Why am I bringing all this up? For this episode, I want to take a break from the narrative we have been following set 20,000 years in an imagined human future and set our attention on the present world and the society we inhabit.

Is there a modern equivalent of psychohistorical determinism, or does our future depend on a few great men? Perhaps now we can update the theory and give due credit to standout female leaders and certainly credit the great scientists and maybe even a profoundly gifted artist or two. So our "great persons" can now include Einstein, Marie Curie, Gandhi, Jesus and the Buddha, Queen Elizabeth, Beethoven, etc. There we've made everything fully up to date and can go on with our understanding of history without a lot of trouble for many of these peoples, histories and so forth. Or maybe we are entirely wrong.

Maybe it's the Spencerian vision. We should pay a little more attention to these great men and women of today. The Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos, the Angela Merkels, the Barack Obamas, even the profoundly influential nemeses like Hitler, Mao and Stalin, not to mention a certain former US president, may be mere products of their culture and society. Perhaps their native talents to lead and influence are inseparable from their nurturing in the bed of their respective cultural contexts. Perhaps most controversially, if these particular figures had never existed, would others as great have taken their place? There's something about celebrity that appeals to the human mind throughout history.

We love or hate our powerful figures and often grant them additional power and authority through our attachment to them. The cult of personality is real and powerful. Without Marxists, Karl Marx would not be so influential. Without his strident followers, a former reality star would still be a harmless entertainer and would never have come anywhere close to the US presidency. Without Nazis, we would never have needed to bother with a failed artist and disturbed lunatic who upended the lives of so many millions in World War II. My point is that these great men are great and sometimes infamously so, because the people make them great.

Their greatness lies in their ability to exploit this dangerously powerful facet of human nature. And yet, I don't want to bury the great man theory too soon. Maybe I'm just being politically correct and not crediting the inherent genius of these figures. Are we really going to say that Einstein, Newton and Galileo didn't matter? Could we really have done without Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad, Catherine the Great, Queen Elizabeth, Harriet Tubman, the list goes on, all dispensable and essentially irrelevant? I think this would cause more than a few people to balk at accepting that great people don't matter to how history plays out.

Now, I want to turn this particular thought experiment not just to the present, but to the personal, because I have stated that the intention of this podcast is a personal exploration of Asimov's Foundation. I know I've pushed way beyond that focus in this episode, but please grant me the indulgence of how I feel that the great man of theory has impacted me directly. That is in the intersection in my life with a couple candidates of that designation. To do so, I need to take you back to an occasion from about 20 years ago in Los Altos Hills, California, a beautifully verdant, upscale neighborhood about 40 miles or so south of San Francisco in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

What led me there was a love for the planet Mars and the idea of humanity's future beyond Earth. I had become a member of the local chapter of the Mars Society, an organization dedicated to advocating for human exploration and eventual settlement of the Red Planet. Our chapter wanted to do a fundraiser and had been planning to feature a famous person known to have similar interests filmmaker James Cameron. Not too long after he'd produced his first enormous breakthrough in the film Titanic. The idea had been kicked around for a while but hadn't gone much beyond talking about it.

A volunteer was needed to drive it forward, and somehow I became that person. And the event would be held at the gorgeous home of Bill Clancy, a NASA scientist. Despite knowing nothing whatsoever about such things, I accepted the role of event coordinator and took it on with gusto. I wrote a stirring invitation letter and sent it out to a hundred or so of the top CEOs and influential figures in Silicon Valley and beyond, including Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Larry Ellison and a bunch of others I'd never heard of. The vast majority of these invitations went unanswered, but we got just enough response to break even on the substantial cost.

One of the people I'd never heard of surprised us all with a huge donation the following day, and the fundraiser turned out to be a great financial success. Our surprise benefactor was a wealthy tech entrepreneur and a huge fan of going to Mars as well. Shortly thereafter, he even attended one of our chapter meetings and shared his vision for how and why he thought it was crucial for humanity to get off the planet. It was wonderful to meet him, but it didn't end there. I introduced myself as a web developer, a career I had only just begun and he asked me if I could do a small web project for him on the side.

I volunteered in a snap to do it for free. He took me out to a nice restaurant in Palo Alto and described what he wanted, and I produced it for him within a week, and that was that. I didn't think it was any big deal at the time, but

as it turns out, I should have thought of it that way. The guy turned out to have some really interesting plans and within a year founded his own rocket company and named it SpaceX. Yeah, this nobody I worked for free for was none other than Elon Musk. Naturally, I've followed the course of his amazing career since then with considerable interest and more than a little regret that I didn't work harder on that project.

I've never heard from him since the day I turned over my work to him and never expect to again. He's just gotten way too big for me now to even know how to approach him. That doesn't stop me from having enormous respect for him in his ability to execute on his vision, which now includes the operation and advancement of the world's most successful electric car company in Tesla, an artificial intelligence company working on human computer interfaces, and other incredibly ambitious ventures, it naturally occurs to me that I may have intersected paths with a truly great man.

One of the things Musk likes to emphasize is that the American human space program languished after the Apollo program because great things like this don't happen on their own. It takes enormous human will, often driven by a small number of people, to make these grand ventures turn into reality. His core philosophy and driving force behind his mission is to make the human race multiplanetary. He genuinely believes that it is essential for us to explore and settle Mars and move beyond the Earth. For if we don't, we will eventually die off from some catastrophe localized to our single fragile planet.

I heartily share this view. To bring things back to Asimov for a moment, there's a little bit of Hari Seldon in this kind of belief, but even more in a character in another classic Asimov series. The robot detective series featuring Daneel Olivaw and Elija Baley. A powerful human member of an offworld caste by the name of Han Fastoff convinces the Earthling Baley that it is essential for humans to inhabit other worlds. This is the genesis in Asimov's larger framework of his future history. For the galactic empire

that we meet at the beginning of Foundation. Is Elon Musk our own Han Fastolf pushing us to begin the great diaspora among the stars?

If so, wouldn't he qualify as a great man influencing human history by his individual living will? I think a strong case can be made for that statement. Going back to that fundraiser, you would think that meeting Elon Musk would be the capstone on it, but I can't say it was. There were a lot of fascinating people there, including the guest of honor, Jim Cameron, who I got to chat with, but also Frank Drake, creator of the famous Drake Equation that estimates the likelihood of extraterrestrial civilizations beyond our own and the charismatic founder of the Mars Society, Robert Zubrin, a visionary but sometimes cantankerous genius I still have the honor of knowing and regularly arguing with on Twitter.

There were many other notables there that night, but I want to mention one in particular who's left a profound influence on my life, my personal invitee to the dinner and the man who sat beside me that night. Renowned science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson. Author of one of the greatest modern classics of sci-fi in the Mars trilogy. It's a story that takes place in the relatively near future and covers the first few hundred years of Mars settlement, a victorious war for independence from Earth authorities, the terraforming of Mars to make it capable of supporting human life in the open, and a profound treatise on new forms of society and governance. I've read it cover to cover several times, along with the vast majority of Robinson's work. I've mentioned his most recent novel before on this podcast, "The Ministry for the Future." It's an eloquent projection of the next few decades on Earth and bears some striking resemblances to the Mars trilogy. The narrative begins with our planet in the throes of an existential crisis, as the rise in temperatures has resulted in massive killer heat waves, apocalyptic floods, and a society in complete turmoil, including waves of ecoterrorism, striking airliners from the sky and sinking ocean liners.

As in the Mars trilogy, humanity must remake a hostile world, and new forms of governance and economy are required. Amazingly, Robinson manages to strike an ultimately optimistic tone. In the end, it is not a dystopia, regardless of the horrors described, but a prescription for the avoidance of one. If enough people would read this book and understand this possible path to a healing and sustainable society upon our home planet, the book's promising future might just be realized. If this were to be the eventual outcome, I would have to nominate Robinson for great man's status as well. Interestingly, he has pulled away from his focus on space exploration and settlement and now sets his sights on healing this world, which he claims is our only home, saying often that there is no Planet B.

Another person I'd nominate for potential greatness is a young woman who became famous for denouncing the prominent leaders of our world for their inaction in the face of the growing and nearly inevitable catastrophe of climate change. Her name is Greta Thunberg, and I've unfortunately never had the honor of meeting her. I guess two greats is already exceeding my quota for one ordinary human lifetime. Musk, Greta and Robinson may all be great, but perhaps they are also just manifestations of inevitable movements of human society, driving them forward.

I suspect that Elon, for one, would disagree with that premise, Greta would likely give you a stern look, and Robinson would just chuckle. I'm happy to consider them all great. Before I go, I want to discuss another piece of writing I recently came across and was fortunate to connect online with its author. Wilson de Silva posted a beautiful essay entitled "Why Go to Space: to Save Humanity and Our Earth," and I'll link to it in the show notes. It makes a stirring case for the Musk position that we have to become multiplanetary in order to save our home planet and ultimately the human race. On the other side of the discussion, I'll also link to a powerful oped in the Financial Times entitled "Kim's Stanley Robinson: a Climate Plan for

a World in Flames," which also includes a 2017 video interview expressing his no Planet B philosophy.

I urge the listener to consider both viewpoints and let me know what you think. This is an incredibly important discussion to have, and I urge everyone to become as knowledgeable as you can on these topics and play your part in a hopefully benevolent psychohistorical determinism of our times. For our next episode, we're back into storytelling mode. As we enter possibly the most powerful segment of the entire Foundation epic, there will be new characters entering our story that I think will leave a powerful impression upon the listener. I've been looking forward to telling this part of the story for a long time and will thoroughly enjoy bringing it to you.

Only one thing left, and that is to leave an earnest plea for support in covering the costs of producing and serving these episodes by becoming a patron through Patreon. I want to extend my thanks to Alan Hauser and my latest patron, Otto Olah, for their generous support for the show. You can give as little as you want and can afford. I realize there is a lot of financial pressure on many of my listeners these days, so it is certainly not expected, but it is hugely appreciated. You'll find a link in the show notes. If you can't help out as a patron, please consider writing a short review on the platform of your choice and let me know where I can find it.

I'd love to give a shout out to anyone who helps in any way in a future episode. See you soon on Seldon Crisis with "The Mule, part I."

[Exit theme music plays out]