

REFERENCE FRAME

A stunning parallel connects the founding of Leiden University in 1575 with events in our nation today. I discovered this while reading *The First Salute*, a history of the early days of our nation by Barbara Tuchman.¹ The tale of the founding is an epilogue to a story well known to every Dutch child—the siege of Leiden.

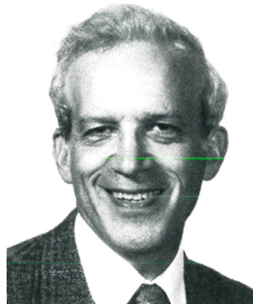
Here is what happened. Much as the North American colonies sought independence from Great Britain in the 1770s, the city-states that eventually became the Netherlands and Belgium sought independence from Spain two centuries earlier. Leadership for the rebellion emerged in the person of Prince William of Orange. In 1574 Leiden became the focus of the military campaign. Spain, determined to starve the city into submission, imposed a relentless blockade. Over a period of months, disease spread and the inhabitants slowly starved, but the city refused to surrender. Finally, in August, Prince William opened the nearby dikes to flood out the enemy, and in early October the Spanish forces departed. By then 6000 people—a third of the city's population—had perished from disease or starvation.

Prince William visited Leiden shortly after its liberation. The people of Leiden, reeling from the siege, undoubtedly asked for his help. His assistance took a surprising form, however, for he had to deal with not only the disaster of Leiden but also the crucial problem of opening peace negotiations with the Spanish king, Philip II. To negotiate he needed somehow to establish legitimacy for the breakaway provinces. He dealt with these problems simultaneously by a totally unconventional strategy. According to historian M. W. Jurriaanse²:

“On the 28th December 1574, even before the actual peace talks had started, in the middle of a winter re-sounding with the tumult of war, in a flooded country where the farmers could not till their fields, where one would have expected disease and widespread destruction to have sapped the nation's energy, the Prince, who was residing at Middelburg in the province of Zeeland at the time, wrote to the States of Holland and Zeeland who were meeting at

The Choice

Daniel Kleppner



Delft. He informed his ‘noble, wise, discreet, dear, distinguished ones’ that it was necessary to establish in the country of Holland or Zeeland a university ‘to be a firm support to and to maintain freedom and the right and lawful government of the country’ where the young would be educated and taught in the proper knowledge of God and in all proper, honest and free arts and sciences.”

Expecting a people in grave distress to focus their attention on founding a university seems most improbable but the states could hardly have responded to Prince William more vigorously. Five days later, on 2 January 1575, they sent him plans outlining the structure of a university to be jointly supported by the northern and southern provinces. On the same day, the states sent a message to Leiden warning that Prince William was planning to establish the university but that although it could be at Leiden, it might be at Middelburg. Leiden wasted not a moment. The very next day the Burghers of Leiden finessed Middelburg by sending Prince William a premature letter of thanks that included the names of members of a committee to push the plans. The committee did not shilly-shally. Within three days, by 6 January, it had produced a charter and in less than a month it had found a building and rounded up a faculty. On 8 February 1575, exactly six weeks after Prince William proposed the idea of a new university, Leiden University was inaugurated. The festivities included a day-long pageant that concluded with a ship sailing up the Rapenburg Canal, piloted by Neptune and bearing Apollo and

the nine muses.

As a morality tale, the decision by the Burghers of Leiden to build a university in a time of distress sounded to me almost too perfect, and so when an opportunity occurred, I made a trip to the university to learn more. Leiden, with all the charms of a canal-laced small Dutch city, was particularly attractive on the sunny day of my visit. There, in an old building overlooking the Rapenburg Canal, I met William Otterspeer, director of the university's historical museum.

Otterspeer is a cheerful and enthusiastic historian with an obvious love of Dutch history, particularly Dutch university history. He explained that the university was founded for reasons that combined crass opportunism and genuine idealism. The city and Prince William wanted the university for the obvious political reason that it would confer prestige and help establish legitimacy. Beyond that, however, the Burghers of Leiden had an elevated vision of the role of a university. It was not to be a mere training school for ministers and doctors; its role was to provide enlightened citizens who would contribute to society by applying broad knowledge and wisdom to whatever task they pursued. With such people, the Burghers of Leiden believed, the city and the state would prosper.

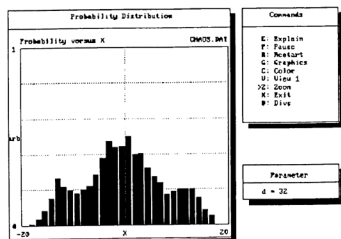
Turning to the present for a moment, in our nation today, we are not recovering from disease, famine, the wreckage of a devastating military attack or any similar crisis. We are, however, at a turning point in the aftermath of the cold war. In planning for the future, we have chosen a path that could hardly differ more from the path followed by the Burghers of Leiden. Education and advanced learning are definitely not our highest priority—that spot is reserved for balancing the budget. They do not occupy even second place—second place goes to tax reduction. One could argue that events in Europe in the 16th century are not particularly relevant to the situation in the United States now. Nevertheless, the flowering of Holland in the years following the founding of the university at Leiden is enviable.

The 17th century was a golden age for Holland. In art it was the age of Rembrandt, Hals and Van Dyck. It was the age of scientists such as Huygens and van Leeuwenhoek, and of great feats of hydraulic engineering.

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It was also an age of high technology in shipbuilding and seamanship. By efficiently transporting timber from the northern countries and employing prefabricating techniques, Holland came to dominate European shipbuilding. Ship design was modernized—a Dutch ship with a crew of 10 could carry as much as an English ship with a crew of 20. By the middle of the 17th century the Dutch had 10 000 ships at sea, control of more than half the trade of Europe, and access to shipping and commerce in the East Indies, Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean and North America. Holland ruled the seas and dominated commerce. The nation bathed in prosperity.

Leiden and its university naturally shared in that prosperity, and in the centuries since then the expectations of the Burghers of Leiden have been borne out. The university continues to be a font of the city's prosperity. Academically, it is one of the world's great institutions. Kamerlingh Onnes first liquefied helium at Leiden and discovered superconductivity there. The university has also been the home of such other great physicists as Lorentz, Ehrenfest, de Sitter and Oort. Today it is a leader in astrophysics, low-temperature physics and chemical physics.

In 1575 the Burghers of Leiden could not have foretold that their country was entering a golden age, but their vision was broad and they gave scholarship and learning their highest priority even at a time of crisis. Today, in this country, we have chosen a much narrower vision—a balanced budget and lower taxes—and to achieve it we are even willing to compromise education and research. Whether or not our budget is balanced and our taxes are lowered, however, we cannot hope to sustain our quality of life, much less to enhance it, while education and research decline. The Burghers of Leiden would never have settled for our choice.

I thank J. Van Beenakker for a helpful conversation and W. Otterspeer for providing historical information. I also thank Boudewijn J. Verhaar for an opportune drive to the Netherlands.

References

1. B. W. Tuchman, *The First Salute*, Knopf, New York, 1988. Tuchman's account of the founding of Leiden University is inaccurate. A more authentic version is given in reference 2.
2. M. W. Jurriaanse, *The Founding of Leyden University*, Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1965.

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