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Dear Stuart,

It occurs to me that I am not fluently in English. The other day I read the biography of Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790). The storey of his lifespan of 84 years squeezed between the covers of a book in 400 pages. I missed out on so many words. Vaguely familiar words, which not belong to my vocabulary, I could easily pass by whilst not loosing the thread of the storey. However, I felt, I would miss out too much of the quintessence of the description of BF's character and decided to scribble in the margin the Dutch translation of any word (verbs/adjectives) which I didn't know or vaguely knew. Vera thought the exercise to be futile. As an aside, would I qualify her dedication to her golf game futile? Absolutely not, it all depends what sort of criteria you apply.

Benjamin Franklin was a charismatic person who was send to Paris at the age of 70 by the American congress to raise the funding for their freedom war from the French Treasury. He arrived in Paris as a celebrity, the inventor of de lightning rod. He was called the American Voltaire. During the eight years in France he succeeded in getting huge loans (secret aid from the standpoint of the British) from France to the extent that it jeopardized the financial stability of France. Indeed, their financial support of the American independence has been one of the factors that has led to the French revolution. The comparison of the molding of 13 independent American states into an governing body with a constitution during the years 1776 till 1778 with that of the formation of the EU intrigues me.

Franklin observed: 'When you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests and their selfish views.'

The above observation by Benjamin Franklin on human nature is still prevailing after more than 200 years. European leaders in 2005 have to justify their standpoint at home to stay in power during the negotiations on the European budget.

The western civilized nations have been founded on the separation of legislative —, executive -and administrative powers additional to the freedom of religion. A prerequisite for freedom of religion is a separation of church -and state affairs. These democratic principles are the pillars in a so-called open society. The people of Middle East countries are locked in as well as divided by their tribal solidarity and each tribe does have strong religious ties with different brands of Muslim religion. The religious hatred, that exists between tribes in Iraq hinders the creation of an open society, a 'conditio sine qua non' for the establishment of a democracy. The Sunnis, for instance, call the Shiites infidels and they loath the Shiite infidels even more than they loath the Jews. Killing a Shiite is praiseworthy and faithful deed in the eyes of Sunny religious leaders, and you may earn a martyrdom for such a slaughter.

The Benjamin Franklin observation on humannature applies to the Arab world as well. As said, a parliamentary democracy presupposes a freedom of religion and it is mine humble opinion, that such a freedom will not happen in the coming 100 years in the Middle East. I am sorry for president G.W. Bush whose presidency will be branded by historians as: 'Always wrong but never in doubt'.

'Changement de chapitre'.

First and second day of the month November president Putin from Russia paid a two day state visit to the Netherlands. I will not digress on growing authority Russia will exert over Western Europe in becoming a major supplier of energy. Instead I like to report on how we, the Dirkzwagers, having their residency on Keizersgracht 702 , were affected by the visit.

Mr and mrs Putin arrived around 11 o'clock am at Amsterdam airport. A standard ceremony at the begin of a state visit is laying a wreath at the National Monument on the Dam Square in Amsterdam by the visiting Head of State. Thereafter they were invited for a private lunch with the Queen in a monumental canal house, i.e. van Loon Museum, a few blocks from ours. Usually, the queen entertains her guests at the Palace on Dam Square, alas for the Putins the Palace is being renovated. A directive from the municipality informed us that no vehicles nor bicycles at both sides of the canal were permitted to be parked on the Keizersgracht between Reguliersgracht and Vijzelstraat, the stretch where the Museum van Loon is situated and where we are living. Early in the morning a good number of street sweepers diligently cleaned the street on both side of the canal, thank you very much. The canal side of Amsterdam without cars is a fairy tale. Later that the morning this stretch was fenced off by police. No traffic at all was permitted to pass by. Returning from shopping, I told the police on guard that I dearly wanted to go to my own apartment. They granted my request and I got accompaniment from a policeman to our front door. Then from around 2 o'clock pm till 4 o'clock pm the residents of this part of the canal even were not permitted to leave their buildings nor to stand at the front door. When Vera attempted to leave the house, immediately she was ordered to stay inside by the police. Admittedly, this 'petite histoire' is not a great infringement on our civil rights, but it surprised us.

Other topic. We had an interesting week visiting the archipelago of Malta in October. We were hardly aware of its history, and we enjoyed visiting a good number of historic sites. The order of the Knights of St John wielded state power over the isles from 1530 till 1795 and they built most of the fortifications around Valetta. Tourism is a major source of income and even in October Valetta was crowded with tourists, mostly shod in sandals. It is not likely that we return to Malta for a second time, however I haste to write that we are glad to have been there.

Summer and fall are over. During winter season we attend to concerts and opera and occasionally we play bridge, see friends and family and when there is time left, I love to read a book. Every Tuesday we have the pleasure of the company of our granddaughter Tessa. We profit from the fact that both parents are working and that we can lend a hand. Furthermore, we pay a lot of attention to my old parents. They are physically fragile, but spiritually very bright, thank God.

Yesterday Vera reached the venerable age of 61. She thinks she is old, and I tell her that she is young. 'Age' is a relative concept. I am four years her senior, thus she remains eternally young from my standpoint.

At the beginning of 2005 we had in mind that we would visit the UK and invite ourselves at yours, and again our longing had not materialized into action. Well then, let us once again promise to see each other in 2006. I know, we have a lot of topics not discussed. For instance, President Bush: I do not like to step in his shoes; the precarious budget deficit of the US; terrorism; the heating of the earthly climate, etc., but I trust we will have no difference of opinion on these issues.

We hope that you both enjoy what you are doing and are in a good shape as well, love from Vera and Adriaan

PS. If you notice a crummy use of the English language due to a lack of practice in writing English letters, you certainly will condone it, after all, Stuart, you are a gentleman.