

The Answer Is, We Weren't

By Dennis Payton Knight

What was I thinking when I decided to modernize the knobs on my bathroom sink? The answer is obvious, I wasn't. Fortunately, I had enough post-catastrophe thinking to improvise a channel of towels diverting the shooting water back to drain down the sink. I had staved off a flood that threatened our building, if not the whole of Windsor Gardens.

What were we thinking? The question is always asked in the past tense because it's always too late for any other tense, and always the answer is we weren't.

Russia discovered and claimed Alaska, an area of 1.7 million square kilometers in the 18th century. They owned it for the next 126 years, doing nothing with it. Then, in 1867, Russia's Emperor Tsar Alexander II recognized it as an icy white elephant and peddled it off to the United States for \$7.2 million. Working the numbers, you'll see we got Alaska for less than two cents an acre, and it probably took no more than a single oil well to pay for it. What were they thinking? They weren't, but luckily, we were; that is, Andrew Johnson, our much maligned President and the first to be impeached, was.

Fred Merkle, a rookie for the New York Giants, hadn't played much in 1908 but started at first that day in a game with the pennant on the line. It was the bottom half of the ninth with the game tied 1-1 and the Giants at bat. With two out, Moose McCormick was on third with Merkle on first. Al Bridwell hit a single to score what should have been the winning run, and fans thronged the field. Merkle left the base path before touching second and ran toward the dugout. The Cubs' Johnny Evers stepped on second and called for the ball. The umpire called Merkle out on a force play to nullify the winning run. The game ended in a tie and the Giants lost the make-up game. Bonehead Merkle cost them the pennant in 1908. What was he thinking? The answer is, he wasn't.

Sometimes our blunders cost us only money. In 1999, engineers at Lockheed Martin in Denver designed a Mars orbiting satellite for NASA using, as Americans typically do, the English system of measurements, but NASA calculated in centimeters, not inches. After the satellite launched and navigation was handed over to NASA control, the orbiter spun off in the wrong direction, lost forever. It cost taxpayers \$125 million, and the blunder was on both teams. What were they thinking? They weren't.

They screw up in Europe, too. In 2014 the company that operates France's prestigious fast rail service purchased two thousand new trains that were too wide for its stations. On that news, a satirical French weekly published a cartoon showing commuters on the platform receiving the announcement, "The Paris-Brest train is entering the station. Please pull in your stomachs." What were they thinking? The answer is obvious.