The Missing Beat: Ideas

By Joan Konner

An idea has swept across the pages of recent news reports, and what an enriching addition to the daily fare of facts and opinion.

The idea comes from Francis Fukuyama, a State Department official, in an essay called “The End of History?” It was published in The National Interest last summer, and it holds that the great ideological war of this century, the war of ideas between communism and democracy, has been won by Western liberal democracy. Therefore, he writes, history, as Hegel defined it, is over.

The article spawned a storm of opinion, but whether Fukuyama is right or wrong politically or ideologically, reporting about it marked one of the few times that something as transcendent as an idea got some play in the news. We read about the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, as if it were just an affair of people demanding a free-market system that they believe will put food on the table and clothes on their backs more quickly. But there is also an idea story happening.

Millions of people in the 142 years since the “Communist Manifesto” was published believed that history was moving toward the proleptic revolution as inevitably as if it were determined by the laws of physics. Communism was like a religion to them, governing and explaining their actions, which were shaking the world. Now the people of Eastern Europe are tossing that idea into the “dustbin of history.”

That’s an idea story — powerful, illuminating, provocative. We wonder: What will the world’s Marxist believers do now? And what is it likely to mean to us 20 years from now? And what about democracy? Democracy has won, but has capitalism? Capitalist democracy has delivered not only freedom, progress, opportunity and prosperity, but also drugs, poverty, epidemic lapses in ethics, not to mention outright crime in business and government, and destitution for millions of hard-working, contributing Americans who happen to get ill on the way to their maker and can’t afford to pay for it.

How does that other side of democracy relate to the collapse of communism? It’s not a story readers and viewers are likely to find in the headlines. Ideas don’t reach the front page or the evening news except as fragments embedded in swift-moving events that are still in the morgue by morning.

Journalism lives and dies by the urgent, the immediate. An idea is conceived in a dialogue with time. Usually it is born at midnight or dawn, and often it does not survive the daylight. When it does, it will make its appearance silently in a book, a specialized journal or quietly in a conversation or a colloquium with colleagues. Today, as knowledge accumulates, more ideas arise from the dynamic of collaboration. An idea can be as fragile as a flower and as powerful as a bomb. A good idea is intoxicating and inspiring, like love, and can cause bubbles of celebration in the brain. News is the spark, but ideas are the flame.

The garden of ideas has the perfect climate for opinion. Opinions sprout everywhere — in a quote, in a column like this one, and especially on television, on “Firing Line” and the “MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour” and even on commercial television, in the Sunday suburbs of “Meet the Press” or “This Week with David Brinkley.” Opinions are “about.” Ideas are “are.” Opinions can influence history, but ideas create it. Ideas can change the world, but rarely do you find them in the geography of popular journalism.

The mind is an endangered species in this society. European journals have a tradition of debating ideas, but the U.S. media, with so many resources to reflect reality, refuse to recognize the whole of it. Ideas are the missing beat. Every now and then we read a report on a conference containing a statement that would affect our thinking, if only we knew more about it, like deconstruction, or supply-side economics, or that perennial news source, religion. Year in and year out we hear about Christianity confronting the swirling tides of modernity. We see fundamentalists in business suits sitting at computers inserting new postscripts to their histories. But how much do we really know about their inner gyroscopes?

Occasionally ideas attract journalistic attention in ghettoized form. It happens in newspapers big enough to have sections on books and the arts, religion and science, trends and ideas, like The New York Times, which recently recognized an absence of intellectual forces, ideas, in American political life. When there is an essay by Roger Rosenblatt raising different questions or making new connections, or a public television program, most notably the work of Bill Moyers, on myth or happiness or evil, they produce a gusher of public interest.

Of course, not every idea is worthy of our attention. The history of dumb ideas is a longer book than the history of wisdom. But the archive of neglected ideas is greater than both — at a considerable loss to history. What is history anyway, if not the chronicle of minds, and of one idea igniting another? That’s what Hegel said so long ago, as Fukuyama reminds us. But then how can history be over, as long as there are minds to make it? In an age of communication, it could be, but only if we don’t report on what makes it.