

American History and Today (part one: 1914-64)

“Recounting the past in photos, film clips and music”

3 important lessons learned from World War I (1914-18) ¹

- Exhaust diplomacy before using force. War should always be regarded as a last resort.
- War is always unpredictable. Once large-scale violence is unleashed, it's difficult to control.
- History teaches life lessons. "There's a danger that World Wars become so distant in our memories that they become abstract." Since 1945 the major powers have not fought each other.

3 important observations gleaned from the Roaring Twenties

- The U.S. experienced culture clashes that began in earnest as immigrants arrived after World War I (1914-18); African-Americans migrated from farms in the south to cities in the north; women newly empowered with the vote entered politics; Catholics began climbing the economic ladder.
- Prohibition of alcohol (1919-33) had unintended consequences, such as fueling organized crime.
- Unrestrained global economic growth is likely to encounter Isaac Newton's Third Law of Physics: "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction."

3 important observations gleaned from The Great Depression (1929-41) ²

- The decline of the U.S. economy in 1929 pulled down most other countries. Then in 1930 U.S. protectionist policies promoted retaliatory tariffs in other countries, exacerbating collapse.
- President Franklin Roosevelt's *New Deal* policies in 1933 either began or accelerated the economic turnaround, and his reassuring words (fireside chats) were the essence of leadership.
- The Depression was backdrop to some of the most memorable stories written: John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*;³ and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.⁴

3 important lessons learned from World War II (1939-45)

- Acknowledge the “messy complexity” of other cultures. Germany underestimated the Soviet Union's resolve and Japan gambled that the U.S. would bargain for peace after Pearl Harbor.
- Hold to your society's fundamental principles, such as democracy, especially in times of crisis.
- Promote multilateral, multinational solutions in foreign policy.³ World War II brought about a wave of fervent internationalism that resulted in the creation of the UN, the Fourth Geneva Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the World Bank, among others.

3 important observations gleaned from the first decade of the Atomic Age (1945-56)

- By assuring “mutual destruction,” nuclear weapons have served as a useful deterrent to war.
- Nuclear technology has been used for peaceful means. The first nuclear reactor to provide electricity to a national grid opened in England in 1956. Fifty years later (2006) there were 442 reactors in 32 nations that generated one-sixth (16%) of the world's electricity.⁴
- The 1951 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was a warning of sorts. It was based on a 1940 short story that was updated after the nuclear bomb (1945), then released during the Korean War.

References:

1. “3 Important Lessons Learned from World War I,” July 28, 2014. Cooper Allen, USA Today.
2. From multiple sources that appear under the title “Great Depression.”
3. “Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II,” a book by Michael Bess.
4. “New Scientist” story Sept. 4, 2006, written by John Pickrell.

3 important observations gleaned from the Eisenhower administration years (1953-61)

- 34th U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had an acute political sense, and outstanding leadership qualities, each “born out of a sense of self-security” (owing to his military training).⁵
- A fiscal conservative, Ike resisted efforts by some Republicans to repeal parts of *The New Deal*.⁵
- Eisenhower created the U.S. interstate highway system, the largest public works program in the country's history, which connected 47,000 miles of roads and transformed U.S. business.

3 important observations gleaned from the U.S. presidential election of 1960

- 70 million Americans viewed the first debate between VP Richard Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy, which was 39% of the U.S. population (180 million). By comparison, 84 million Americans (26% of the U.S. population), viewed the first Clinton-Trump debate in 2016.
- Presidential elections are won by electoral votes, not popular votes. A (wise) campaign strategy devotes most of the candidate's time, money, attention and energy to those “feasible” states that constitute a majority, and does not waste time (where there) is little chance of success.⁶
- Even a young U.S. Senator (JFK), inexperienced in executive administration and a member of an oft-disparaged demographic minority group (Catholic), can, through hard work, defeat a hard-nosed, hardhearted WASP who scowls more than smiles.⁶

American History and Today (part two: 1964 to present day)

3 important observations gleaned from the U.S. war in Vietnam (1962-75)

- French colonial occupiers were defeated by the Vietnamese in 1954, but fearing further spread of communism in Southeast Asia, the U.S. created a “South” Vietnam, which set the table for war.⁷
- Some 3 million Vietnamese died during the war, which repulsed people throughout the world. As television images of assassinations, carpet bombings, and napalm crept into the nightly news, and Americans began coming home in body bags, protesters took to the streets in late 1960s.⁷
- The *Tet Offensive* on January 30, 1968 refuted the hopeful outcome of the Vietnam War predicted by the Lyndon Johnson administration, and yet five more years passed before Richard Nixon announced the end of the war during his “Peace with honor” speech on January 23, 1973.

3 important observations gleaned from post-war America in the 1970s

- Neither wartime President Lyndon Johnson nor Richard Nixon were targets of assassination, but post-war President Gerald Ford was the target of two attempts in a 17-day span in 1975.
- Space exploration (landing rover vehicles on Mars in 1976) served as a needed distraction from Vietnam War grief, and helped restore the American people's confidence in their government.
- In the wake of losing the Vietnam War, the 1976 film *Rocky*, intentionally or not, conveyed the message that losing with honor was an acceptable outcome, provided warriors did their best.

References:

5. “Lessons learned from Eisenhower,” by Albert R. Hunt, Bloomberg News, published June 3, 2012 New York Times.
6. “13 Lessons from the 1960 Presidential Campaign,” by Ted Sorenson, Campaigns & Elections, Oct. 26, 2010.
7. “Did the U.S. Learn Any Lessons from Vietnam?” by Robert Freeman, Common Dreams, Feb. 1, 2015.

Film clips from “American History and Today”

Produced & presented by John LeGear from TimComm.com

**indicates film clip may be found on YouTube

3 important lessons learned during the Reagan administration years (1981-89)

- While 40th U.S. President Ronald Reagan easily won both of his elections to the oval office, his success suggested that a politician’s “likeability” can be almost as important as “capability.”
- Terrorism can only be defeated by a coalition of countries bent on destroying it by using all available options: legal, banking, sanctions, military, intelligence, and covert action.⁸
- NASA scientist James Hansen announced in 1988 with 99% certainty that “*global warming has begun,*” which he attributed directly to man-made carbon dioxide build-up.

3 important observations gleaned from the 1990s

- U.S. Army General Norman Schwarzkopf led forces from a coalition of 35 nations in 1991 to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait and entered Iraqi territory to complete the rout, **but not to serve as an occupying force**, which history taught then President George H.W. Bush was fraught with peril.
- 42nd U.S. President Bill Clinton easily won a three-way race in 1992 and presided over a thriving economy for the first seven of his eight years, much of it attributed to the technology boom.
- Some of Clinton’s best work and much of the U.S. Congress’ most productive days occurred when Republicans took control of the House of Representatives (1994 mid-term election) and “compromise” by both major parties was required/achieved to pass legislation.

3 important observations gleaned from the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations

- 43rd U.S. President George W. Bush claimed Iraq had “**weapons of mass destruction**” to persuade a majority in Congress to give him the option to invade Iraq. No such weapons were found.
- Bloated technology stocks deflated through Bush’s two terms, and then in 2007 the so-called “housing bubble” burst, crippling the U.S. and world economies, leading to **The Great Recession**.
- Barack Obama was elected for two terms, becoming the first African American to serve as U.S. President (#44). His early policies pulled the U.S. economy out of its tailspin and his popularity around the world restored faith in the United States as the lone superpower on the planet.

3 important observations gleaned from the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump

- Republican candidate Donald Trump tapped into simmering anger of the “white working class,” long regarded a reliable voting block for Democrats, to help him win a stunning election victory.
- Terrorism events at home and abroad in 2016 gave the appearance that a Democrat in the White House was unable to curtail violence, further hindering Hillary Clinton’s election prospects.
- By denying man-made contributions to “climate change,” calling it a hoax, and then in 2020 by minimizing the dangers of Covid-19, Trump demonstrated his inability to grasp complex events.

3 important observations gleaned from the 2020 presidential election of Joe Biden

- Democrat Joe Biden won the election by offering sobering “change” to what most everyone described as a chaotic four years under incumbent Trump, whose most noteworthy achievement was sustaining a strong economy up until the Covid-19 pandemic took hold early in 2020.
- President Biden and VP Kamala Harris inherited millions of struggling households requiring financial assistance and a raging Covid-19 pandemic, but managed to turn things around early on.
- Steadily rising inflation marred Biden’s first term; Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (2022) and the terrorist attack on Israel (2023) stirred unrest worldwide, muting many Biden accomplishments.

References:

8. “Lessons Learned from the 1980s” excerpted from comments on PBS Frontline by L. Paul Bremer, who served in the Reagan administration as ambassador-at-large on counterterrorism 1986-89; and who also worked for George W. Bush.

1. 1-2:** **Back to the Future** (1985) starring Michael J. Fox to the tune “Sh-Boom” (1954) performed by The Koi Boys
2. 1-8: **World War I** (1914-18) overview excerpted from The History Channel
3. 1-25: **Historian/Journalist Jon Meacham** excerpt from his book/documentary “**The Soul of America**”
4. 1-34: **Inherit the Wind** (1960) starring Spencer Tracy dramatizing “The Scopes Monkey Trial” of 1925
5. 1-37: **Route 66** by Marcia Ball as she celebrates the famous highway and we feature it in Pontiac, Illinois
6. 1-53** **Cheek to Cheek from “Top Hat”**: Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers (1935)
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Part 2 (1964 thru present day)

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