

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

“Recounting the past century 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 should be remembered. "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 the first World War; 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 had unintended consequences, including fueling organized crime.
- Unrestrained global economic growth is often 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*;" and Harper Lee's "*To Kill a Mockingbird*."

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, 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" on Wikipedia.
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 – this lesson was reinforced in 2008.⁶

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 to set its 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.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 somewhat of a 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.

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 enter Iraqi territory to complete the rout, *but not to serve as an occupying force*, which history had taught then-President Bush was fraught with hazards.
- 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 Bill 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 super power on the planet.

3 important observations gleaned from the 2016 presidential election

- 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.
- Denying man-made contributions to "climate change," which President Trump described as a hoax, will haunt his legacy as the planet continues its 50-year warming trend.

2 important observations gleaned from the 2020 presidential election

- Democrat Joe Biden prevailed by offering a sobering "change" to what most everyone described as a "chaotic" four years under incumbent Donald Trump, whose most noteworthy achievement was sustaining a strong economy up until the Covid-19 pandemic took hold early in 2020.
- President Joe Biden and VP Kamala Harris inherited millions of struggling households requiring financial assistance; a raging Covid-19 pandemic; and a newly impeached Donald Trump (for the second time), a combination of crises that had not been seen in the U.S. since Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration during The Great Depression in 1933.

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.

Film clips from "American History and Today"

Produced & presented by John LeGear

Contact us at TimComm.com

**indicates video is on YouTube (search "John LeGear + history")

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** with Spencer Tracy (1960) dramatizing "The Scopes Monkey Trial" (1925)
 5. 1-37:** **Route 66** montage accompanied by song of the same name performed by Marcia Ball
 6. 1-52:** **Cheek to Cheek from "Top Hat"**: Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers (1935)
 7. 1-59:** **Amelia Earhart tribute** from the film "Amelia" (2009) starring Hilary Swank and Richard Gere
 8. 1-63: **War of the Worlds** radio play by Orson Welles broadcast Oct. 30, 1938
 9. 1-68: **Mr. Smith Goes to Washington** (1939) starring (in this scene) James Stewart
 10. 1-74:** **World War II tribute (1939-45)** **A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square** performed by Joanie Summers (1962)
 11. 1-85: **Vietnam** during Truman administration (1949) from "Vietnam" by Ken Burns & Lynn Novick
 12. 1-91: **Korean War** seals U.S. fate in Vietnam (1950) from "Vietnam" by Ken Burns & Lynn Novick
 13. 1-94: **The Day The Earth Stood Still**: Michael Rennie & Patricia Neal (1951)
 14. 1-96** **Singin' in the Rain**: Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor & Debbie Reynolds (1952)
 15. 1-112: **Blue Suede Shoes** by Elvis Presley (1956)
 16. 1-123: **Duck and Cover** civil defense film featured in schools throughout US in 1950s
 17. 1-126: **The Constitution is our Rule book** (from "Bridge of Spies") with Scott Shepherd and Tom Hanks
 18. 1-134: **Alan Shepard space launch** (1961) from "**Hidden Figures**" (depicting Katherine Gobel Johnson)
 19. 1-149: **Johnny Angel**: Shelley Fabares merged with news of **The Cuban Missile Crisis** (1962)
 20. 1-161:** **The Music Man** (1962): Robert Preston and Shirley Jones et al.
 21. 1-166 **Barney recites Preamble to Constitution**: "The Andy Griffith Show" with Don Knotts (1963)
 22. 1-174:** **Twist and Shout**: The Beatles (1963) and Matthew Broderick in **Ferris Bueller's Day Off** (1986)
 23. 1-177: **Ol' Man River/Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man of Mine** (exit music) from **Showboat**
- INTERMISSION**
24. 2-3:** **Cassius Clay vs. Sonny Liston** February 25, 1964
 25. 2-10 **Historian/Journalist Jon Meacham** excerpt from his book/HBO documentary "**The Soul of America**"
 26. 2-12: **Lyndon Johnson/Gulf of Tonkin** (1964) from "Vietnam" by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick
 27. 2-25* **Remembering Vietnam**: I'll Remember You written by Kui Lee; sung by Elvis Presley (1966)
 28. 2-47: **Vietnam prisoners come home** from "Vietnam" in 1973 by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick (2016) 2-50
 29. 2-71: ** **Ronald Reagan of Illinois/"Daydream Believer"** performed by Anne Murray (1979)
 30. 2-77: **Steven Spielberg**: "History is its own reminder of how bad things can get"
 31. 2-78: **Yesterday Once More** by Karen and Richard Carpenter (1973)
 32. 2-80: **Sally Ride & Challenger crew** montage (1983) to "Mustang Sally" by The Commitments
 33. 2-86** **Footloose** (1984) with Kevin Bacon and Lori Singer 2-97:
 34. 2-106: **The American President**: Michael Douglas & Annette Bening (1995) 2-125
 35. 2-136: **The Big Bang Theory**: Jim Parsons, Kaley Cuoco, Johnny Galecki et al. (2010)
 36. 2-147** **VOTE montage**: Hillary Clinton & Donald Trump (2016); "Saturday Night Live" cast (NBC)
 37. 2-191: **"This is what heroism looks like in 2020:"** Health care providers and front-line workers savings lives every day
 38. 2-218: **Insurrection**: Mob attack on U.S. Capitol while Congress was in session January 6, 2021