

By James Walker

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Review? What a year it has been

Wow. What a year it has been since I returned to writing columns on Dec. 1, 2019.

Who could have imagined that a virus would not only become the dominant story of the year, but bully its way through a nation mired in chaotic social upheaval to take over the way we live, work and socialize.

And, perhaps, change our future.

The year started with me taking a look at the usual suspects: immigration, gun violence in Black communities, racism and discrimination, as well as crime.

“We must find a way to bullet-proof these young boys and men. Their bodies must stop becoming the final resting place for bullets naked of allegiance.”

Along the way, I wrote about the governor and marijuana, bad manners, the resurrection of curfews, subpar parenting and whether Universal Basic Income was a good idea to help struggling Americans.

I tackled police brutality, racial tensions, solitary confinement, inmates affected by the coronavirus, the blatant unfairness of our judicial system and term limits for politicians.

“My entire life has been spent in a boxer’s stance throwing jabs and uppercuts and an occasional knockout at stereotypical images I inherited as a black man.”

I let out my frustration and anger at the growing number of unarmed Black men being killed by police.

“I don’t think there is any doubt: It has become OK in America to kill black men and it is time that Americans admit it. ... We can’t go into stores and restaurants, we can’t go into hotels, we can’t birdwatch in parks, we can’t look at houses under construction unless we are faced with the wrath of hate and racism.”

And I labeled the judges, defense attorneys and prosecutors who allow the mockery of justice to continue as mere accomplices to a system that is designed to harm minorities and low-income whites but offers them a paycheck.

“I don’t care what anyone says; something is wrong with a system that keeps allowing the same men to return to the street under the supervision of parole officers who can’t keep up. I have long believed that judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys are not held accountable for their roles in keeping criminals on the streets and the public in danger.”

I questioned the rallying cry of “America first” when so many brands we think of as American -- such as Ben & Jerry’s, Sara Lee cakes, Arnold bread, Entenmanns, Trader Joe’s, 7-Eleven, Holiday Inn, the Chicago Stock Exchange, Smithfield Foods, AMC Theaters, and the Waldorf Astoria in New York -- are all foreign-owned.

“And what is more American than Forbes magazine — that “Capitalist Tool” that Americans with money turn to? It also is owned by a Chinese company.”

I even showed how big businesses use smokers for research under the guise of “age verification.” Why else would they scan the driver’s licenses of 60, 70 and 80-year-old people? It certainly can’t be to verify they’re old enough to purchase cigarettes.

But it wasn't all grim reading. I saluted volunteerism, cancer and domestic violence support groups, community gardens and the power of casting a vote.

I noted how a 16-acre square in downtown New Haven brought all walks of life together in relative peace and harmony.

And I also noted how that same 16-acre square showed the dark side of homelessness and mental illness and the cost to society for failing to provide a solution.

I even took readers on a wild ride with a theory of how movies can retell and soften American history about slavery. In my hypothesis, movies do that by casting Black people in prominent historical roles that do not align with what's in the history books.

“Black people at King Arthur’s court in the age of Camelot? Really? Black people at the palace hobnobbing with Russian aristocracy during the era of Catherine the Great? Black people dressed in French-lace and silk finery and arguing with whites during social events at the Palace of Versailles in the 12th century? Really? These things happened?”

And when I spotted a bright, cherry red Gremlin in Bridgeport that someone had lovingly restored, I took readers down memory lane and recalled things that are now obsolete such as the Chatty Cathy and Patty Playpal dolls, Fotomat, operator-assistance when using a phone, and nasty-tasting medications our parents forced down our throats like Cod Liver Oil.

But it took my colleague Randy Beach, a die-hard Yankee fan, to remind me that back then, the World Series was broadcast during the school day so guys hid the transistor between the pages of school books and used earphones covered by their hand over the ear to listen in.

And in a different nod to things gone by, I also lamented how technology brought ease and convenience to our fingertips but the price for having it was the true advent of the loss of privacy. And let's not forget the new worker bees, the working robots.

“But shocking to me was that robots will likely take some journalists’ jobs in the near future. Can you imagine that?”

For the most part, the issues we faced this year -- though explosive, political, emotional and divisional -- were nothing new. They were leftovers that will undoubtedly be served up again.

But then along came COVID-19 -- and everything changed as the funerals began and anxiety became as visible as sweat.

Uncertainty reigned as some people strapped on masks and waited for the hail Mary vaccine while others took up arms against the dark gloom of an imagined dystopian future.

The virus exposed long-known disparities in health care for minorities that could no longer be ignored; nor could the Black communities distrust of the medical establishment.

And it also exposed the vulnerability of senior citizens in nursing homes.

“Medical professionals at every level are trained to know the basics and any fool knows that a deadly, airborne virus will affect the most vulnerable. And they don’t come any more vulnerable or susceptible to illness than fragile senior citizens. The horror show that nursing homes have been for seniors this year is inexcusable.”

Yes, a turbulent year is coming to end.

But what will not come to an end are the issues that I have written about in 2020 that still remain unsettled.

But, perhaps, a new year will bring a stronger resolve to earnestly tackle and find answers to those issues.

That would be a real promising beginning to a new year.

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Happy New Year folks. Have a drink on me -- but charge it to you.