

States of the Union

HAVE A GOOD DECADE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



LET US PAUSE NOW, as we head into the final year of the Nixon-Ford-Carter decade, to draw up a preliminary balance sheet for the Seventies. It may not be an edifying sight. Then again, it may prove less ugly than some would have thought.

We spent the early part of the decade getting into a lot of trouble and then getting out of it. In the end we managed to exorcise two cussedly durable demons, either of which might have spelled our ruination: a heartless war we couldn't win and a tawdry administration many of us couldn't abide. It was a blessed relief to be done with both, to

make an end to the lying and the killing, to take a little time out from the practice of daily outrage.

Catching our collective breath, we mistakenly concluded that the source of all our difficulties had been "politics," forgetting that in those remembered agonies it was the Constitution itself—our prime political guarantor of domestic sanity—that had ultimately redeemed us. Forgetting, too, that in a republic politics is the very stuff of life, the only reliable process enabling a citizenry to silence its nightmares and give tongue to its dreams.

So we chose for President a man whose chief qualification was that he had spent most of his days in Georgia; he had never lived in Washington. For many of us Washington had become what Wall Street had been for others a century earlier: a seat of corruption and arbitrary power. Jimmy Carter, a seemingly honest nonentity whose thin voice could barely be heard above the routine din, suited our disillusionments. He would never lie to us; he would never patronize us; he would never attempt to *change* us. (Of course, he has done all three.)

If reforms were necessary, they would be personal rather than political, private rather than public. Our

young people threw away their picket signs, no longer prepared to march for peace or racial equality. Along with the rest of us they retreated into a vast narcissism, part mystic, part vocational. They flocked to law schools and medical schools; they bought cars and stereo sets; they read up on stocks and bonds.

And all the while they searched diligently for The Answer, the spiritual formula that would invest their lives with meaning. The Ego and the Id were enthroned. Horoscopes and biorhythms, Scientology and est, invaded their heads and won their hearts. The new spiritual games were largely devoid of challenge; they did not engage the passive pilgrim in any of the great questions. Instead, they excited and exculpated. "Long-range" goals turned out to be immediate gratifications.

The narcissism seemed positively pandemic. Everyone bought cameras and snapped each other's pictures, waiting impatiently for the 10 seconds it took to convert the click to a four-color self-image. Mirrors appeared everywhere—in bars and discos, at airports, on bedroom ceilings. The mirrors were mainly for self-admiration. On tiny stages in "topless bars," naked girls danced before their own reflections, their backsides wiggling insouciantly at sullen male revelers.

Self-love was stage center; guilt and fear were stuffed in the wings. "I love the god within me," sang the Colored Girls Who Had Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Was Enuf. No more fear of flying. I'm ok, you're ok, we're all ok. Click click click.

It wasn't the kids' fault. They were just going their parents one better. The whole country, it seemed, was turning inward, taking care of Number One, looking right through any compatriot who happened to be down on his or her luck. The established religions were as ready as the new cults to cheer up and exonerate their congregants. Sermons yielded to group therapy sessions; thousands of church social action committees that had formed in the extroverted Sixties vanished into the reflexive Seventies. Even the Jews, a people said to be stiff-necked, succumbed

to the self-indulgent mood—especially in suburban temples and synagogues where, on the Day of Atonement, rabbis would assure their flocks they had little to atone for. Guilt was a bad trip, a Freudian straitjacket. To the Ten Commandments these Panglossian pastors added a sure-fire Eleventh: Thou shalt not fret.

It was all part of a quiet national hysteria. We were keeping our spirits up in a scary time, whistling in the dark and often guffawing a bit too loudly, sounding like canned laughter on sitcom television. We became oddly cordial to strangers. Everyone and everything was “nice”; everyone was supposed to *like* everyone else. We were all on a first-name basis with our twice-born President. No one ever said “good-bye” anymore; they said “have a good day.” Fake intimacy was ritualized in scores of corporate scripts: *We hope you enjoy your stay in the New York area. . . . Dear Subscriber, it's time we really got to know one another. . . . Hi, I'm Cindy. . . . Please fill out this brief questionnaire that measures your Happiness Quotient. . . .* If this was the best of all possible worlds, then why was everybody *smiling*?

Still, one could guess that the madness might be abating. The evidence, although spotty, was hopeful. For one thing, and despite the coast-to-coast ambience of sham affections, people were continuing to fall in love with each other; moreover, after a decade-long connubial lull, they were actually getting married and having children. A small victory, perhaps; but in a world bounded by mirrors and public address systems, one settled for whatever outcroppings of mutual commitment one glimpsed. Besides, people always need love and love always needs children. What America needed in a hurry was more love-children—more generous offspring of more caring parents.

Then, too, there were signs that our self-imposed vacation from politics might be nearing an end. True, a majority of us went on shunning the polling booth—that private place of surpassing public interest. Yet it was true as well that others among us of late had

entered the electoral fray perhaps for the first time. These were the much-maligned “single issue” partisans—the right-to-lifers, the Proposition Thirteeners—whose politics were sometimes moralistic, sometimes paranoid, but always passionate.

Liberals need not have lamented the appearance of those unhappy citizens in the political arena, any more than they mourned the sudden rise in 1972 of George McGovern, the liberals' first single-issue Presidential candidate since William Jennings Bryan. McGovern alienated a lot of mainstreamers, but at the same time he made it possible for outsiders to become politically active in a respectable, albeit losing, cause. Many of those political newcomers stuck around long after McGovern had dropped out. One hears them today muttering darkly about the dangerous new trend toward single-issue candidacies.

The fact is we have a long tradition in America of single-issue voting, whether for free silver, women's suffrage or Prohibition, or *against* slavery, war or abortions. And while we are generally suspicious of government and its interfering ways, we seldom hesitate to insist that it interfere with persons engaged in activities we abhor. The individuals who cry loudest that the government should get off their backs can usually be counted on to suggest another set of backs where it might roost.

THE SITUATION, however, is more complicated than that. If the Seventies have been a poor excuse for a decade, one reason has been a cranky skepticism that precisely parallels the agenda of those who would revoke the legacy of the Sixties. Uneven as the Great Society accomplishments were, we have been tacitly relying on them to brake our narcissism and dilute our rich indifference toward the sufferers among us. What is more, to an astonishing degree the Sixties have not failed us. Americans overall may not be voting as often as they once did, but *black* Americans are voting in greater numbers now than at any

time in their history, including Reconstruction. The civil rights revolution was not a paltry occurrence; it was far-reaching and permanent, and it paid off in bread.

The bread itself is a product of the Sixties, a time when the myth that “nobody goes to bed hungry in America” was irrevocably shattered. “Since 1967,” says Nick Kotz, the writer who did most to disabuse us of that myth, “Congress has enacted more than a dozen food aid laws and now appropriates more than \$9 billion annually to feed the poor.” In consequence, “There is far less raw hunger in the United States than there was 10 years ago, and there has been progress in meeting the problems of malnutrition.”

These programs, which have vouchsafed to millions of children a more even break in the American marathon, could never have been enacted in the Selfish Seventies. Indeed, both Nixon and Ford did everything they could to prod children back toward hunger by promoting legislation that would have put an end to food stamps. Three consecutive Congresses chose to preserve, even to increase, the appropriations—in part because the lawmakers felt responsible to their newly-enfranchised constituencies of blacks, browns and reds.

The anti-hunger effort is just one example of the good the Sixties have continued to do while the Seventies have slept. Additional examples might include our network of day care centers, our community action programs and our cleaner air—all benefits conferred during the Sixties and taken for granted in the Seventies.

American history texts are notoriously bland and mainstream in their interpretations, yet they have a way of singling out those periods that have concentrated on redistributing both justice and wealth: the Age of Jackson, Reconstruction, the New Deal. The 1960s, with all their false promise and authentic excess, will still be one for the books. The 1970s, with its psychic mirrors and mirages, will be quickly passed over. Surely it's time for a fresh decade.