Dec-1999

Editor's Notebook: The More Things Change

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Recommended Citation

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol18/iss2/4
The publication date on this issue of Bridgewater Review is December, 1999, so this is the last edition of our journal in the millennium. Somehow that statement makes it sound like we've been publishing for a thousand years rather than a modest fifteen. But big-deal pronouncements like that are only an accident of timing, just like your claim that the jumbo bag of Fritos in your desk drawer is the last you'll buy this millennium. (We can all hope, can't we?) Do not feel guilty about any desire you may have to elevate everyday acts to the status of millennial milestone. We all do it at times like this. It's just our way of pausing before we plunge into the next phase of our lives so we can put into perspective where we've just been. Presumably, taking stock helps us make better decisions about how to live out the next thousand years. ("No more Fritos for me, and no more Spanish Inquisition neither, by gum!") So please indulge me in a bit of stock-taking, even if the pretext is thin and the portent fat.

How can we get a grip on where we've been? To begin with, I think I'll drop the millennium scale. Europeans seem pretty comfortable thinking in terms of events that happened 1,000 years ago. What fun they'll have in England and Scandinavia in 2066 celebrating the anniversary of the Norman conquest. But we Americans have much shorter memories. Even remembering the last World Series won by Boston strains our systems. (I won't insult you with the date.) So, I'd like to use a scale that makes sense to all right-thinking Americans. Let's use my lifetime.

I was born in 1946, and during the approximately half-century since, the following things have changed. In 1950 there were 152 million Americans and at the turn of the century there are over 270 million. Those same figures translated into population density reveal that in 1950 there were 43 Americans for each square mile of land, while now there are 70. Too abstract for you? Then translate the density figures into number of hikers you meet on the way to the top of Mount Leave-Me-Alone and the lack of open lots in which your kids can build a tree fort without the adults knowing.

Speaking of children and adults, do you think the age of the American population has gone up or down since WWII? Well, in 1950 the median age in the country was just over 30 while at the turn of the century it is over 35 and climbing fast. In 1950, about 12.5% of the population was over the age of 65 and in 2,000 the figure is almost 35%. (So, what's the deal with all the youth culture rigamarole?) Things cost more. In 1950 the average salary for a public school teacher was $2,794 a year. A size "C" flashlight battery cost 9 cents, a Coca-Cola was 5 cents and a tube of toothpaste was 43 cents. The purchasing power of a dollar has gone down. If we use the purchasing power of a dollar in 1982 as the standard (one dollar in 1982 buys one dollar’s-worth of goods and services), then in 1950 a dollar bought $3.55 worth of goods and services while in 2,000 it buys 75 cents worth. Hmmm. No wonder we need higher incomes.

And my mother tells me that in 1950 you could count on speaking to your children every day, whereas in the year 2,000 they rarely call, even though they have those fancy cell phones.

However, my mother also claims that most things have not changed in fifty years. For example, while it still hurts to give birth to a baby, babies also still smell great and can turn their grandparents' brains to farina with one gummy smile. Books can still transport a reader for longer periods of time and more intensely than any film, television program or computer game. Work is work. And my dear, departed grandfather’s wisdom was as valuable in 1950 as it is now when he said that "It is better to be rich and healthy than sick and poor." Feel more secure now?

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