

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

Chapter 10

The Parade

As we near the end of the presidency of George W. Bush, it is tempting to join the chorus of criticism that is being piled upon our hapless 43rd President. The consensus emerging among historians, pundits, and analysts of various stripes seems to be that the best one can say that the Bush presidency is that it was consequential. The harshest assessment is that Bush will be judged by history as one of the worst American presidents ever. Either way, he seems destined to leave a lasting legacy in his wake.

My take on Number 43 is somewhat different: as the first President of the Age of Consequences, Mr. Bush is notable more for what he *did not do* than what he did. Additionally, but no less significantly, his presidency tells us a lot about the role of the Baby Boomers in our modern predicament. But let's begin with a recap of our current president's accomplishments.

What Bush did principally was start two bottomless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with all their collateral damage, including over 4000 dead American soldiers (plus 30,000 wounded) and a \$3 trillion hole punched through the nation's financial coffers. Whether these wars will be judged to have been worth their high cost – i.e., whether they are 'winnable' ultimately or produce democratic governments in two nations notorious for their repression and political instability, only time will tell. Recall that the original justification for the invasion of Iraq was Saddam Hussein's supposed stash of weapons of mass destruction. In any case, a substantial amount of Bush's legacy will rest on the outcomes of these two conflicts.

What *is* clear, however, at least to this observer, is that the means by which the president and his administration took us to war in Iraq – the falsehoods, the ineptitude, the brazen flaunting of world opinion, the snubbing of allies, the utter disregard for bipartisanship, and an outrageous arrogance in general – is a permanent black mark on his record. Then there were the suspensions of civil liberties, the "extreme rendition" of suspected Al-Qaida members, and the torture of prisoners that followed the invasion. Terrorist threat or no terrorist threat, this wasn't how a United States government was supposed to behave.

Bush didn't seem to care what other people thought. During the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, as the world reverberated with the sounds of anti-war demonstrations, I remember thinking: "Can a government call itself 'democratic' if it is completely insensitive to the voices of the people?" Not a single protest or voice of dissent mattered – the Bush administration turned a deaf ear to the public and plowed ahead with its agenda. Well, an answer to my question began to take shape in the wake of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, as an inadequate government response angered the nation. Bush's poll numbers dived and never recovered. His fall translated into major gains for the Democratic Party in the 2006 mid-term elections, and, ultimately, its triumph in the 2008 general election, in which Bush and his party were soundly repudiated. Apparently, in a republic the voices of the people still matter.

Then there is the issue of the economy. Though much has been made of Bush's strong leadership following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, I believe history will judge his poor handling of the economy as more consequential in the long run. As the economic aftershocks of 9/15 continue to

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

spread across the nation, it is clear that Bush and Co. have no one to blame but themselves and their laissez-faire/free market ideology for the devastation wrecking everything from Wall Street to Main Street.

In an article titled “*The \$10 Trillion Hangover*” in the current issue of *Harper’s Magazine*, economists Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz write: “In the eight years since George W. Bush took office, nearly every component of the U.S. economy has deteriorated.” Here’s their list of economic woe:

- The nation’s budgets, trade deficits, and debts have reached record levels;
- Unemployment is way up, household savings are down;
- Four million manufacturing jobs have evaporated;
- The number of Americans without health insurance has risen 19% since 2000;
- Consumer debt has doubled;
- One-fifth of Americans are likely to owe more in mortgage debt than their house is worth;
- Interest on the debt is now the fourth-largest category in the federal budget;
- The cost of family health care premium has jumped 87% since 2000;
- The number of families in poverty rose from 6.4 million to 7.6 million;
- Real median household income dropped 1% since 2000;
- Corporate profits surged 68%;
- The national debt was \$5.7 trillion in 2001 – now it is \$10.6 trillion – and that’s before the impact of the financial meltdown hits;
- Servicing this new debt will cost American families \$2000 a year, year after year, forever;
- The national debt is now 70% of the GDP, the highest in fifty years;
- The share of public debt owed to foreign nationals has risen from 31% in 2001 to 46% today.

“The outgoing administration has made a series of unwise economic choices that together will add up to a burdensome legacy,” they write. They calculate that bill for Bush-era spending – new debt + new obligations – amounts to \$10 trillion, a mammoth and unprecedented number. When Bush took office he inherited a budget surplus of \$128 billion. What happened next, according to Bilmes and Stiglitz, was this: the administration pushed through two massive, inequitable tax cuts and increased government spending by 59%, surging the deficit to a projected \$1.2 trillion by the end of 2008, with more red ink on the way.

“Whether we struggle to break our addiction to deficit spending in order to pay off our debts, or wind up inflating them away,” they write, “the economic mistakes of the George W. Bush White House will cast a long shadow over the next generation of Americans.”

Then there is the role that the Bush administration played in the housing mortgage crisis itself and the subsequent economic atomic blast that has devastated the nation. Indicators suggest Bush and Co. dropped the regulatory ball big time, thereby allowing all sorts of corporate greed and malfeasance to spiral out-of-control on Wall Street. The administration denies it did anything wrong, of course, but the fact remains: this crisis happened on Bush’s watch, which means he

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

will bear the burden of its legacy. More importantly, the crisis happened, in my opinion, as a result of Bush's promotion of a laissez-faire capitalist ideology at odds with the real world (including *real* – not modeled or idealized – human behavior).

Despite this catastrophic 'market failure,' the President remains typically unrepentant.

In an op-ed published in the *Wall Street Journal* on November 15th, 2008, titled: "*The Surest Path Back to Prosperity*," Bush wrote: "the long-term solution to today's problems is sustained economic growth. And the surest path to that growth is free markets and free people... The record is unmistakable: If you seek economic growth, social justice and human dignity, the free market is the way to go. It would be a terrible mistake to allow a few months of crisis to undermine 60 years of success."

Viva La Fiesta.

Which brings me to what President Bush *did not* accomplish in eight years: no reform of Social Security and Medicare, which are due to go bankrupt in a decade or so; no reform of the nation's dependence on foreign oil, including no new steps toward anything resembling renewable energy (the administration moved quietly in the opposite direction, in fact); no attempt to tackle runaway health care costs, which are stabbing average Americans through their checkbooks; and nothing substantial on the environment front, despite important signs that we're facing an ecological crisis of serious proportions.

Take climate change. During Bush's eight-year presidency, the United Nation's International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a global assembly of climatologists and other scientists, issued two major updates on global warming, one in 2002 and another in 2007. The conclusions of both reports were unequivocal: 1) climate change is largely human-caused; and 2) governments must take action or life on earth will be jeopardized.

The Bush administration did nothing substantive in response to these reports. At first, they dismissed the science, saying it was 'vague' and 'contradictory.' Then, when the consensus grew too large to ignore, Bush and Co. tacked into the headwind with a new message: action on climate would damage the economy. But as pressure built, including poll numbers showing growing support for action of some sort, the administration tacked once more: alright, we get the message, they said, things are heating up – but now it's *too late* to do anything meaningful, we'll have to adjust somehow to a warmer planet.

In other words, the first President of the Age of Consequences sat on his hands over a crucial eight-year period, during which concentrations of CO₂, a significant greenhouse gas, rose from 345 to 385 parts-per-million (it was 280 ppm in 1750). Most scientists agree that if CO₂ concentrations reach 450 ppm it will cause irreversible environmental damage to the earth's life-support systems – and many think we're already in the danger zone. Either way, I suspect we'll come to regret Bush's inaction in not-so-distant future.

I believe Bush's presidency can be summed up this way: on foreign policy, he took a big step forward, with disastrous consequences; on the economy, he took a big step back, also

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

disastrously; and on everything else he maintained Business-As-Usual (BAU), possibly also with disastrous results.

But we can't just blame George W. Bush for our current troubles. His predecessor, William J. Clinton, didn't accomplish very much either along these lines during his eight years as president. In fact, viewed through the prism of the Age of Consequences, I don't see a great deal of difference between the two men, despite their obvious political and ideological disagreements. Clinton didn't reform Social Security, promote renewable energy, fix health care, or tackle climate change (though Congress shares the blame too). Instead, during the Clinton years, our corporate industrial economy went global, "free" trade was liberalized internationally, planetary health continued its deterioration, and greenhouse gas emissions maintained their steady rise.

True, Clinton didn't embroil us in endless wars or alienate global public opinion with our foreign policy. And true, he managed to create a federal budget surplus by the time he left office in 2001 – a noteworthy accomplishment. He also presided over a strong economy, though cheap energy prices had as much to do with this as anything else (oil bottomed out at \$11-a-barrel in 1999). So, one could argue that in comparison, Clinton was a "better" president than Mr. Bush and will enjoy a happier judgment by historians.

Perhaps – but there is another factor at work that will affect both of their legacies.

It's called the Baby Boom – the 75 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964. I'll cite just two reasons why this generation is critically important to the dawning of the Age of Consequences: first, more than half of all known oil deposits – in the *trillions* of barrels – will be burned up during the lifetime of a typical Boomer; and second, they control much of America's power, wealth, and culture today. This is especially true of those at the front end of the Boomer generation, represented by Bush and Clinton, both of whom turned sixty in the summer of 2006.

Which brings me to a third reason: I believe there is a significant difference between the front end of the Baby Boom – those born between 1946 and 1955 – and those born on the back end of the bell-shaped curve. And the difference between these two half-generations accounts for a great deal of cultural, social, and economic dynamism (some might say tension) in America today.

I picture the entire Baby Boom generation as a miles-long parade. The front end of the parade is dominated by a noisy, quarrelsome, revolutionary lot, still determined to change the world. Those of us at the back of the parade – I was eight in 1968 – have a different perspective. We didn't riot in the streets, get gassed or shot, or storm school buildings. We came of age after Watergate, grew up listening to disco, and surveyed the successes, excesses, and damage created by barricade-crashing front enders. We literally picked up the pieces. If front-enders pulled walls down, back enders tried to build new structures from the rubble.

It is a cliché now to point out that Boomers grew up during an era of unprecedented prosperity and security, enjoying the fruits of a robust economy and its unfettered materialism. It's equally cliché to note that many early Boomers rebelled against this rising materialism during the mid-

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

1960s, pushing back against their parent's values with anti-war protests, hippie lifestyles, in-your-face antics, and, of course, sex, drugs, and rock n'roll. Revolution was in the air and tear gas filled the streets. Overturning the old order was the zeitgeist of the day.

These clichés, however, obscure the impressive and varied accomplishments of this determined and idealistic half-generation (1946-1955). They include: the expansion of civil rights and liberties; the exercise of democratic rights to freedom of expression and assembly, often under trying circumstances; the challenge to stifling orthodoxies and institutions; the upending of traditional political alliances and orders; the birth of the women's liberation and environmental movements; the questioning of materialism; the opening of new frontiers in art and technology; and much more.

In my opinion, these admirable successes happened for a reason: they were the product of a specific set of 'front ender' qualities, exemplified by Bush and Clinton, including, supreme self-confidence, unstoppable drive, a penchant for confrontation, incredible energy, situational ethics (more pronounced in Clinton's case), and a desire to fundamentally remake the world.

Here's one example: in his chronicle of the era titled *Boom!: Talking about the Sixties: What Happened, How It Shaped Today, Lessons for Tomorrow*, journalist Tom Brokaw tells the story of Dr. Judith Rodin, who became the first female president ever of an Ivy-League school (her alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania).

Rodin entered Penn as an undergraduate in 1962 and described her first two years as essentially an extension of the 1950s. "Students were very concerned about their own lives, social events, and classroom performance," she told Brokaw, "they were neither politically nor socially active." Then came Kennedy's assassination, the Civil Rights Act, and the expansion of the Vietnam War – and everything changed.

Rodin soon became president of a campus group called Women's Student Government; she organized voter registration drives in the South during spring break; and she participated in anti-war protests on campus. Upon graduation, she went to Columbia to pursue a PhD in psychology, discovering that some of the older faculty members refused to work with female doctoral candidates because they couldn't be "serious" about their careers! Then she lost a year's worth of research when a student uprising in 1968, led by Mark Rudd, closed the campus and culminated in a violent confrontation with New York City police. The loss of her data made her more focused than ever. "It made me tough in a positive way," she recalled, "it made me very, very determined."

She joined the faculty at Yale, and in 1992 became the university's Provost. She was, by her own calculation, driven. Her marriage came apart. "I used to think you could have it all," she said. "Now I believe you can have it all, but not all at the same time. There are costs to every decision. Mine weren't cost-free. I had only one child and two divorces. That's a cost."

At a party to celebrate her departure from Yale to become the next president of Penn, she noticed how the young women in the room evaluated her success. "A lot of the women looked at how I

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

led my life and decided they didn't want to live at that level of drive and anxiety, with no free time, forgetting to breathe!" she told Brokaw.

Still, she had no regrets. "When Lyndon Johnson decided not to run for reelection in 1968," she said, "we felt we had changed the world. Whether it was true or not...it was an extraordinarily heady experience for my generation, and it influenced us for a long time."

Some chose a different path. Filmmaker Lawrence Kasdan ('The Big Chill') told Brokaw that at some point many of his fellow Boomers gave up their idealism and succumbed to the impulses of getting rather than giving. "I want the house, I want the car, I want the school," Kasdan said. "No matter how strong your beliefs are, you'll be under constant pressure. It's like trying to hold back the ocean."

When Tom Brokaw reminded Bill Clinton that many of the young people who disdained material goods and wealth in the 60s were now among the wealthiest people in the world, Clinton replied "It was always an energetic generation." The real test, he continued, will be how the generation responds to its wealth.

For her part, Hillary Clinton, who gave the commencement address at Wellesley in 1969, summed up the message of the 1960s this way: "Choose your own life, make your own decisions. I think it was great for America."

At the end of his book, Brokaw – who is not a Boomer – summed up the generation affectionately this way: they were rude, selfish, self-centered, idealistic and revolutionary. "But it's a different world today," he continued. "We need to be mindful that this is a smaller planet with many more people than forty years ago, and that the future will depend a great deal more on cooperation, large and small, than confrontation."

Which brings me to the 'back enders' – those born between 1955 and 1964. I believe they developed a very different set of personality traits, and they did so partly as a reaction to front ender behavior. These traits include: a desire for reconciliation, a need to find pragmatic solutions to problems, a tempered idealism (verging on cynicism at times), and a faith in cooperation. These are qualities, not coincidentally, represented by President-elect Barack Obama, who was born in 1961.

It's not just my opinion. In a story published ten days before the inauguration titled "Obama Ushers in a New Cultural Era," reporter Jocelyn Noveck of the Associated Press, notes that the departure of George W. Bush will mark the passing of an entire generation shaped by the bitter divisions caused by the Vietnam War, civil rights, sexual freedoms and much more.

"Those experiences, the theory goes, led Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, to become deeply motivated by ideology and mired in decades-old conflicts," she writes. And Obama? "He's an example of a new pragmatism: Idealistic but realistic, post-partisan, unthreatened by dissent, eager and able to come up with new ways to solve problems."

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

Obama himself has commented on this difference. Writing about the political clashes between Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich (another front ender) during the mid-1990s in his autobiography *Audacity of Hope*, Obama said “I sometimes felt as if I were watching the psychodrama of the baby boom generation – a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of campuses long ago – played out on the national stage.”

He went on to say:

“It’s precisely the pursuit of ideological purity, the rigid orthodoxy and the sheer predictability of our current political debate, that keeps us from finding new ways to meet the challenges we face as a country. It’s what keeps us locked in “either/or” thinking...”

They are out there, I think to myself, those ordinary citizens who have grown up in the midst of all the political and cultural battles, but who have found a way – in their own lives, at least – to make peace with their neighbors, and themselves.

I imagine they are waiting for a politics with the maturity to balance idealism and realism, to distinguish between what can and cannot be compromised, to admit the possibility that the other side might sometimes have a point.”

As a back ender myself, these words resonate very strongly. Let me briefly cite an example from personal experience.

In the mid-1990s, I became involved in the so-called ‘grazing wars’ in the American Southwest – the acrimonious struggle between environmentalists and ranchers over livestock grazing on public lands. The conflict was represented by dueling bumper stickers: “Cattle Free by ‘93” shouted one, and “Cattle Galore by ‘94” yelled the other. It was a classic either/or situation, with no room for middle ground.

I came to this “debate” via the Sierra Club, where as a long-time member I had absorbed the anti-cow rhetoric of my peers. At first, I accepted uncritically their position that cattle ranching was an “irredeemable” activity in arid environments. I also embraced the standard “us versus them” paradigm of my fellow environmentalists, which viewed our work as a moral struggle between Good (us) and Evil (them – loggers, miners, whalers, polluters, global corporations, and so on). So, when I decided to become active with the Club in 1994, I signed up for confrontation and was ready to man the barricades.

But then I met a rancher, Jim Winder, who completely changed my perspective. Rather than fight, Jim had joined the Sierra Club and briefly served as a member of the organization’s statewide Executive Committee. He wanted to “meet the enemy,” as he put it, and understand what was motivating “the other side.” He wanted to find common ground, to reach out, and maybe, create some peace on the battlefield. But it was more than that too, as I quickly discovered.

Jim ranched differently. He moved his cows across the land in a way that mimicked nature’s patterns of herbivory (think bison migrations). He got along with wildlife – he even supported the reintroduction of the Mexican wolf, much to the anger of his fellow ranchers. He cooperated

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

with government agencies, with environmental groups, and scientific bureaus. In short, Jim searched for solutions. He was pragmatic, funny, and effective.

He was also, I noticed, the same age as myself.

As I waded deeper into the so-called ‘grazing wars,’ I began to see a pattern: much of the conflict on both sides was being driven by leaders a half-generation older than myself. They were activists who had come-of-age during a time when confrontation, stubbornness, and arrogance were the norm. On the environmental side, these leaders were well-known for a ‘take no prisoners’ attitude, which meant they found themselves in unending conflict with rural people. Where I live, in northern New Mexico, this meant conflict with low-income, traditional Hispanic communities. Not surprisingly, more than once environmentalists were hung in effigy by angry village residents. A bomb was even placed inside the mail box of a prominent, and highly litigious, environmental group in Santa Fe. Fortunately, it didn’t go off.

It wasn’t any better on the ranching side. A rural-based, pro-extractive, anti-government group called “People for the West!” was just as aggressive, stubborn and arrogant as any environmental organization.

Jim and I sought a different path. We decided to leave the brawl and step into a new field and build something new – something that was eventually called the ‘radical center.’ We pursued collaboration and common ground, advocating for progressive land management practices that helped land and people. By doing so, we joined a small but growing movement in the West that sought practical resolutions to age-old conflicts between rural and urban residents.

I don’t tell this story in order to assume an air of moral superiority for back enders. Rather, I think it illustrates how we came to this moment in time partly. Front enders, such as Clinton and Bush, had an important hand, pro and con, in creating the challenges we all face today. Back enders will have a big role to play as well, but in a significantly different way. That’s because we will eventually assume the reins of power and influence and hold them well into the Age of Consequences (one – Mr. Obama – will assume power very shortly). And the dynamic tension between these two half-generations will continue to shape a great deal of current history, I believe.

Our current predicament has many sources and is not simply the inevitable result of a human imperative to dominate the planet, abetted by technology and fueled by cheap oil. It is also the product of specific historical forces, including the mighty impact of the Baby Boom generation. Front enders, such as George W. Bush, will leave a lasting legacy that has as much to do with his age as it does with his politics. The same will probably be said of Barack Obama. Together, they create important book ends to a momentous period of rapid change in American history. What happens next is anyone’s guess.

But I can’t wait to find out.