

You Gets No Bread with One Meatball: America Then and Now

Written by Jack Sparacino
Tuesday, 08 August 2017 10:55



"[Five Star General George C.] Marshall was the quietest and most modest great figure of an era: he never raised his voice, never gave angry commands, never threatened or bullied people. His strength came from his sense of purpose and duty, which were absolute; his almost unique control of his own ego; and his ability to separate what mattered from what did not . . . Marshall quietly possessed a rare mind of uncommon intellectual strength, with an exceptional sense of the consequences of deeds. - David Halberstam, The Coldest Winter (Hachette Books, 2007)

Regarding Wayne County (TN) Republican Party Chairwoman Stephanie Pearson: *"But she's more ashamed of the way Democrats, the media and opponents have attacked her president, and she is disappointed in congressional Republicans for not doing more to help Trump . . . There's very little that would change her mind about Trump. "I don't know what he would have to do . . . I guess maybe kill someone. Just in cold blood,"*

Pearson said
. - USA Today
, 7/14/17

We've sure vaulted a staggering distance in the past 70-80 years or so. George Marshall - an anti-Trump role model if we ever had one - led the U.S. Army in WWII, then served famously as Secretary of State for Harry Truman. Ms. Pearson . . . well, her mind regarding Mr. Trump seems cast in granite. If we unfairly connected only these two points in time represented by General Marshall and Ms. Pearson, one might conclude that America has fallen off a discriminatory and intellectual cliff. Fortunately, we have many more data points to draw from. I suggest that we've always had extremes, turkeys and eagles. A fair historical comparison from the 30's to the present might even show we've come a long way for the overall good, if no thanks to hyper partisan pols like Pearson.

One backdrop here is the president's campaign slogan to "Make America Great Again."

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This suggests that not only are we not great now but that in the memorable past we were indeed great. May I explore these presumptions?

As for the past, suppose we return briefly to the 1930's and 40's, which subsumed the Great Depression and WWII. The horrific perils of the 1930's in America (and worldwide) included the desperation and meanness implied in my title. "One Meatball" was written by Hy Zaret and Lou Singer and sung by Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters. It's a tad tongue-in-cheek, invoking a low-on-dough diner facing a discouraging waiter. The lyrics reflect the extraordinarily tough times so many Americans endured, which included 25% unemployment, deflated futures, soup and bread lines. The enormous pool of jobless men prompted employers to repeatedly slash wages. Department store clerks received perhaps \$5 a week. In 1932 hourly wages were chiseled down to coolie levels of 7 1/2 cents an hour in general contracting, 5 cents in sawmills and 6 cents in brick and tile manufacturing, for example. Countless Americans went to bed hungry and one lonely meatball was frequently out of reach. Bread? Maybe yes, maybe not.

Finding a competent doctor was frighteningly hit and miss back then - and well beyond - and admen were no help when it came to American health. A full page cigarette ad proclaimed that "by speeding up the flow of digestive fluids and increasing alkalinity, Camels give digestion a helping hand." According to famed historian William Manchester, "Old Golds were tested for British thermal units in something called an oxygen bomb calorimeter." Inhaling that high class smoke must be good for you, right? Race relations were hardly great, either, and the pain started early for blacks. A sign outside a Mississippi fence read, "Easter egg hunt. White children 9:30 A.M.; colored children 3:30 P.M." Far worse but consistent, Congress refused to take an official stance against lynching.

On the up side, of course, life back then had its highlights. Invoking Manchester again (*The Glory and the Dream*), circa 1932, "To be sure, you needed money, but not a great deal; an annual income of \$5,000 or \$6,000, or even less, brought comforts unknown today. The middle class world was much quieter. There were no sonic booms, high-impact rock drills, air compressors, chain saws, hi-fi sets . . . or 125-decibel rock groups . . . It was more private." The FBI had fewer than three million fingerprints and credit card theft was, of course, unknown. And without doubt the Greatest Generation earned its moniker. The lean, resilient young men and women who won the war were grossly underestimated by Nazi Germany and the Japanese empire, facilitating our enemies' eventual destruction.

Fast forward to the present. We still confront a grossly mixed bag but overall remain great.

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Modern conveniences, many software driven, have been a blessing in terms of increased convenience and efficiency. Automation, however, has been a huge job killer and there simply aren't enough coal and heavy manufacturing jobs to reemploy enough people wedded to these and related industries. Sorry, Mr. President and your coal country supporters. Think clean energy like wind and solar. Jobs, yes; calamitous filth, no.

More modern advantages abound and accelerate. New cars are so tricked out, including advanced safety features, they'll make your head spin, and not just when air bags deploy. I'll be long gone before decoding all the cool stuff in our new A6. And while shopping malls and all the jobs that go with them are disappearing (Credit Suisse just predicted that 20-25% of the more than 1,000 existing enclosed malls in the U.S. will evaporate by 2022), American houses are burning down less often (about 50% from 1980-2014) and the percentage of structurally deficient roads and bridges is actually declining (from 24.1% in 1990 to 9.6% in 2015). And speaking again of medicine, gene editing in human embryos to prevent horrid inherited diseases (think Charlie Gard) may be just around the corner.

But obviously it isn't all good news today; far from it. June Foray, the voice of Rocky the flying squirrel and Russian spy Natasha Fatale, died last week. She did, of course, have a terrific run and made it to 99 with grace and humor. Speaking of which, I must mention the White House and its lack thereof. Just when one thought life around the oval office couldn't get much stranger or more disturbing, it actually did this past week or so.

Our narcissistic, fact-averse commander in chief let loose with more doozies, including his bizarre claim of a "historic increase in military spending," a special sore spot for me, having worked in defense for many years. While Trump proposed a 10% (\$54B) increase in the Pentagon budget, there have been ten or more larger increases to the base defense budget since the 1977 fiscal year. His "speech" to the apolitical Boy Scouts at their National Jamboree was so political and self-serving (Washington is a "sewer," etc.) that Boy Scout Chief Michael Surbaugh issued a public apology. Amazing. Then we have 10-day White House Communications Director Anthony ("The Mooch") Scaramucci; his interview with *The New Yorker*

s Ryan Lizza was so profane I nearly inhaled my coffee. Plus the matter of Trump's adolescent public dumping on his Attorney General, Jeff Sessions - a fellow I'm not fond of politically but find myself sympathetic toward - and the jettisoning of chief of staff Reince Priebus.

As conservative icon Peggy Noonan wrote recently in the Wall Street Journal, "*The truth, six months in, is that he is not presidential and is not getting it done. His mad, blubbery petulance isn't working for him but against him. If he were presidential he'd be getting it done* -

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building momentum, gaining support. He'd be over 50%, not under 40%. He'd have health care, and more."

So where to from here? Perhaps Make America Great Again via Trump (I prefer Make America Even Greater) is a matter of him stepping aside so it can actually happen. With the country evenly split at 42% as to whether he should be impeached, maybe we're on our way. In the meantime, maybe Scaramucci can counsel him (yes, way off-line). He says he loves Trump . . . won't good people do anything for love? I'm thinking a nice big s' Moochy fireside chat.

Then . . . meatballs for everyone. And bread!