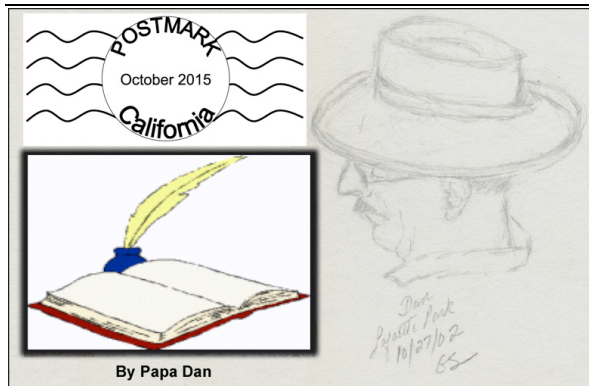


Decades We Have Known (and one we're still getting to know)

By Dan Sapone



**“Yes, here we are,
right in the middle of it;
but what should we call it?”**

Those of us who went to school around the middle of the 20th century were taught to understand the passing of time in distinct eras, each having its own character and name. For example, the thousand-year period called “The Middle Ages” was a characterized principally by ignorance and short life spans. Following that, it seems, the focus of history narrowed to individual centuries. The 15th century (roughly, 1450 to 1550) is remembered for its intellectual and artistic awakening and discovery and thus called “The Renaissance.” Today, our understanding of distinct definable time periods comes down roughly to decades, both in our education and in popular culture.

So, as I read the news and listen to the pundits of our day, as they attempt to identify the trends of our times, I am driven to ask:

- given the pattern of the decades we have come to know best, what name would a thoughtful person give to the decade in which we live today? How will the 2010-2020 decade be remembered in the years to come?

Of course, since this decade is not finished, our judgments must be preliminary. But let's give it a try. As a start, let's review the decades of the most accomplished and truly “American” century of them all, the 20th century.

1900 to 1910 — “The Good Years”

During the first ten years of the 20th century, from an American point of view, the world was mostly at peace. Shirts cost 23¢, but the children who made them earned a mere \$3.54 a week. Teddy Roosevelt proposed to strengthen the U.S economy with his Square Deal and sent the U.S. Navy around the globe to introduce the world to the idea of American power. My grandparents, like 3 million other immigrants escaping a crushing depression in Southern Italy, sailed in the belly of big ships from Naples to New York. Last but not least, my father rounded out the decade by being born in Red Jacket, West Virginia on October 10, 1910.

For many Americans, according to a commentator of that time (John Clark), “The future was simple; rewards would go to the virtuous” and Americans perceived themselves to have “the personal material out of which a millennium would grow.” Historians have called this decade “The Good Years”

(see Walter Lord’s *The Good Years*, Harper and Row, 1960).

1910 to 1920 — “The End of Empire, War in Europe”

A powerful worldwide upheaval began. In America, much of the population moved to cities and there was a dramatic reduction in immigrants from Europe compared to the mass migration of the previous decade. The world began to see the end of a long-established world order, disintegrated into World War I, and suffered the historically unprecedented destruction and loss of life that went with it. A “new world order” was established once “the war to end all wars” finally ... well, so we claimed ... ended war itself and, in America, ushering in ...

1920 to 1930 — “The Jazz Age” (or “The Roaring Twenties”)

This decade began, inauspiciously, on January 16, 1920 with the onset of Prohibition. It is hard to accept that the alcohol-marinated events of “The Jazz Age” could possibly have begun with a national decision to prohibit alcohol consumption; but as Will Rogers famously said, “Prohibition is better than no alcohol at all.”

Songwriter and philosopher Jacques Brel summed up ‘The Twenties’ this way:

“We must dance because the Twenties roar,
The Twenties roar because there’s bathtub gin,
Vo-de-oh-do and the road to sin,
The road to whoopee and a whole lot more.
Charles A Lindberg, tons of confetti,
Dempsey, Tunney, Sacco and Vanzetti
Black, Black Monday and the market drops
But we keep on dancing, dancing, we can’t stop.”

For many Americans, the party didn’t stop, until ...

1930 to 1940 — “The Great Depression”

On the day the Jazz Age ended, the Thirties began: October 29, 1929, with the stock market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression. Unemployment and bread lines became the dominant images. Across the Atlantic, the world darkened further with the growing power of Fascism and Nazism in Europe and the pervasive fear that all of Europe would plunge into war again. The lights went out, virtually worldwide, for the better part of the decade, until ...

1940 to 1950 — “World War II, Victory, The Seeds of Prosperity”

The Forties arguably began on September 1, 1939 with Hitler’s invasion of Poland, formally starting World War II. Many Americans, led by Charles Lindberg and other vocal isolationists, insisted that America should stay out of the troubles in Europe and focus on our own economic challenges. While most remember December 7, 1941, as the day that got America into the war, it was actually December 11 – the day that Hitler declared war on the U.S. and Russia. That gave President Roosevelt the clear justification to actively enter the war. The disastrous unemployment of The Great Depression was “solved” with the massive ramp-up of industrial production to support the war effort, which put Americans back to work (although the war killed 60-80 million people worldwide).

1950 to 1960 — “Stability, The Cold War, and Prosperity ... *for Most of Us*”

Looking back as someone born in 1950 into a middle-class community, the Fifties was a period of stability and order, a large-scale expansion of the American middle class, and the re-establishment of a calm and mostly prosperous domestic life for much of America that hadn’t really been seen since the start of the century. A new brand of celebrities like Allen Ginsberg and Maynard G. Krebs introduced Americans to the new vocabulary of “The Beat Generation.” But ...

The Cold War started. It began with the Berlin blockade on June 24, 1948, or maybe with the establishment of NATO on April 4, 1950, or perhaps with Joseph McCarthy’s “Wheeling” speech on February 9, 1950. Domestically, the uneven (mostly white) prosperity of the Fifties, coupled with the return to ghettos of many returning U.S. soldiers, the Fifties surely germinated the seeds of the turmoil that burst forth in the next decade.

1960 to 1970 — “The Age of Aquarius”

The Sixties began with a sense of optimism and inspiration epitomized by the election of an eloquent and youthful president, but those hopes were dashed dramatically on November 22, 1963. While the polarization, cynicism, and youth rebellion often associated with the Sixties is traced back by many to the Kennedy assassination, the Era of Rock and Roll as well as much of the colorful wildness and anti-establishment post-Woodstock psychedelia and self-actualization associated with the the Sixties really didn’t come into full flower until the early 1970s. In the middle of the decade, discontent among those who did not benefit from the prosperous “normal” of the Fifties (i.e., African Americans) erupted violently in cities all across America as a reaction against brutal racism and income inequality. Others marched in the streets to protest a war that those who grew up in the Fifties did not understand; once they did understand it, they liked it even less. THAT Sixties was not colorful, prosperous, or peaceful (and 50,000 U.S. soldiers did not come home from that new war).

1970 to 1980 — “The Me Decade”

The Seventies really began on June 17, 1973, even though few people noticed at the time. Five associates of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (yes, known as CREEP) were apprehended while breaking into the Democratic National Committee Headquarters in the Watergate office complex in Washington D.C. In spite of efforts by the president to “make one thing perfectly clear,” one thing led to another and introduced some enduring phrases into the American lexicon: “The Plumbers Unit,” “The people need to know that their president is not a crook,” articles of impeachment, a resignation, and, perhaps most lastingly, the suffix “-gate.” Some would argue that American politics would never be the same. Others argued that “the same” was exactly what it was ... and continued to be.

1980 to 1990 — “The Beginning of Fact-Free American Politics”

The Eighties began on January 20, 1981, minutes after the presidency had passed from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan and Iran released the 52 Americans who had been held hostage for 444 days. The decade that followed featured the distortion of American conservatism, from a moderate notion of limited government (actually practiced by Republicans from the 1950s through the era of Watergate) to the excessive expansion of government under the Reagan administration. (Surprised? Look up the numbers – highest Federal budgets per GDP, most Federal employees in history, widespread international intervention, etc.). And all of this took place amid the simultaneous “Small-Government” rhetoric of...well...Ronald Reagan.

1990 to 2000 — “The Best Decade Ever” (so reported by the WSJ and the NYT)

The Nineties were characterized by the rise of multiculturalism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the spread of capitalism in that vacuum. In American politics, the Nineties were dominated by a battle between the centrism of the Clinton administration and the politics of personal destruction perfected by the other party, later named RINO by the fictional Will McAvoy of *Newsnight* (for “Republican In Name Only”). The American economy grew at a strong 4%, median household income rose by 10%, the poverty rate fell from 15% to 11%, the U.S. murder rate declined by 41%, the federal government ended the decade with a budget surplus, the Stock Market quadrupled in value, and the wearing of neckties in offices began to diminish. But,

On the world stage, wars broke out in the Congo, the Persian Gulf, Chechnya (twice), Kashmir, Kosovo, Yugoslavia, Croatia, and Bosnia, to name only a few, and a host of civil wars redrew maps on at least two continents. However, apartheid in South Africa came to an end. The Nineties also featured an unprecedented explosion of the Internet and computer technology (although these advances were soon to be dwarfed by a greater explosion of the Internet and computer technology just around the corner).

2000 to 2010 — “The Rise of Terrorism and The Great Recession ”

The Oughts, the first decade of the 21st century was initiated by the arrival of large-scale terrorism on American soil. This heinous crime was followed by a panicked attempt to combat terrorism through the dismantlement of civil liberties at home and a misdirected military response against a country and a dictator who had nothing to do with 9/11.

Oh, yes, the U.S. had a historic period of anti-intellectualism, manifest in the depletion of education budgets and leadership of a president “misunderestimated” for his lack of interest in intellect, let alone possession of it (stimulating an all-but-forgotten quote from Garrison Keillor: “Who needs a fifty-dollar haircut on a fifty-cent head?”).

The housing finance and stock market investment disaster during the Dubya era sent the U.S. economy into a tailspin. Recession and unemployment were stopped just short of a Depression by an infusion of fiscal stimulus and government regulation (who wouldda thunk it?).

2010 to 2020 — “Whah?”

Well, that brings us to the present decade, of which we stand approximately in the middle and the question that I started with:

→ What should we name this decade? More precisely, what are we likely to call it when this decade is done? So, let’s explore what we know about this current decade, so far.

The ?????

- The West’s war against terrorism becomes terrorism’s war against The West.
- The end of “carefree” in America and the avoidance of crowds.
- A generalized paranoia, growing gun ownership, and gun violence.
- A gradual, but dramatically uneven increase in prosperity.
- A decline in the power of labor unions and a decrease in the size of the middle class.
- The re-emergence of racial tension, especially between minorities and law enforcement.
- The maturing of “Fact-Free Politics” and the trend toward “voting against” in which nobody believes fully in the available choices.

→ I invite you, dear reader, to send us your suggestions. What should we call this decade we inhabit today? I am interested in your ideas.

For fun, below is an added bonus for those who, like me, identify decades with music ...

The Soundtracks of the Decades

(The most popular songs listed on *U.S. Billboard*)

The Tens:

[When You Were Sweet Sixteen](#) (1900)
Stars & Stripes Forever (1901)
Bill Bailey (Won't You Please Come Home) (1902)
In the Good Old Summer Time (1903)
Sweet Adeline (1904)
Give My Regards to Broadway (1905)
Yankee Doodle (1905)
Auld Lang Syne (1907)
My Gal Sal (1907)
Take Me Out to the Ball Game (1908)
I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now (1909)
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot (1909)

The Teens:

Let Me Call You Sweetheart (1910)
By the Light of the Silvery Moon (1910)
[Alexander's Ragtime band](#) (1911)
When Irish Eyes Are Smiling (1913)
By the Beautiful Sea (1914)
Carry Me Back to Old Virginney (1915)
I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier (1915)
O Sole Mio (My Sunshine) (1916, Enrico Caruso)
Over There (1917)
For Me and My Gal (1917)
Rock-A-Bye Your Baby (With a Dixie Melody) (1918)
I'm Always Chasing Rainbows (1918)

The Twenties:

Swanee (1920, Al Jolson)
My Man (1922, Fannie Brice)
Yes! We Have No Bananas (1923)
[Rhapsody in Blue](#) (1924, George Gerschwin)
California, Here I Come (1924, Al Jolson)
[Sweet Georgia Brown](#) (1925)
Ain't She Sweet? (1927)
[Stardust](#) (1927, Hoagy Carmicheal)
Ol' Man River (1928)
[Mack the Knife](#) (1928)
Ain't Misbehavin' (1929)
Tip Toe Thru' The Tulips With Me (1929)

The Thirties:

Happy Days Are Here Again (1930)
Dream a Little Dream of Me (1931)
It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing) (1932, Duke Ellington)
Stormy Weather (Keeps Rainin' All the Time) (1933)
[Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?](#) (1932, Bing Crosby, others)
On The Good Ship Lollipop (1935, Shirley Temple)
[Summertime](#) (1936, Billie Holiday)
They Can't Take That Away From Me 1937, Fred Astair)
Blue Moon (1935)
Sing, Sing, Sing (With A Swing) (1937, Benny Goodman)
September in the Rain (1937)
Thanks For the Memory (1938, Bob Hope and Shirley Ross)
[Over the Rainbow](#) (1939, Judy Garland)
God Bless America (1939, Kate Smith)
Back in the Saddle Again (1939, Gene Autry)

The Forties:

[When You Wish Upon a Star](#) (1940)
In the Mood (1940, Glenn Miller)
Blues in the Night (1942)
[White Christmas](#) (1942, Bing Crosby)
[As Time Goes By](#) (1943)
[Don't Fence Me In](#) (1944, Bing Crosby)
This Land is Your Land (1944, Woody Guthrie)
The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire) (1946, Nat King Cole)
[Some Enchanted Evening](#) (1949, Perry Como)
All I Want For Christmas is My Two Front Teeth (1949 Spike Jones)
Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer (1949, Gene Autry)
[La Vie En Rose](#) (1949, Edith Piaf)

The Fifties:

How Much Is That Doggie in the Window (1953, Patti Page)
Mister Sandman (1954, The Chordettes)
Sh-Boom (Life Could Be a Dream) (1954, The Crew-Cuts)
[Three Coins in the Fountain](#) (1954, Four Aces)
[Mambo Italiano](#) (1954, Rosemary Clooney, yep George's mom)
[Stranger in Paradise](#) (1954, Tony Bennett)
[Sixteen Tons](#) (1955, Tennessee Ernie Ford)
[Rock Around the Clock](#) (1955)
[Heartbreak Hotel](#), All Shook Up, Hound Dog, Don't Be Cruel (1956, Elvis Presley)
[Que sera sera \(Whatever will be will be\)](#) (1956, Doris Day)
At the Hop (1957)
[It's All in the Game](#) (1958, Tommy Edwards)
[Johnny B Goode](#) (1958, Chuck Berry)
[All I Have to Do is Dream](#) (1958, Everly Brothers)
[Venus](#) (1959, Frankie Avalon)

The Sixties, Seventies, Eighties, Nineties, Oughts, etc
YOU KNOW THESE, DON'T YOU?

For a these songs and more – check out: <http://tsort.info/music/ds1930.htm>