

# The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events  
impacting the world's financial markets*

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### CONFLICT OF THE 1990S: CULTURAL WAR REPLACES COLD WAR

Mark L. Melcher

In the last two issues, I reviewed two books that I believe offer some insights into the nature and origin of the extraordinary social, political and economic change that is occurring in the United States today.

In the first, *The Rise of Radical Egalitarianism*, Aaron Wildavsky argues that there is a war going on between the nation's individualists and people he describes as egalitarians. To make his complicated theory short and easy, these egalitarians are seeking to diminish the rewards for individual excellence and initiative, and thus to undermine the economic doctrine that made the United States the powerful nation it is today.

Jose Ortega Y Gasset's book, *The Revolt of the Masses*, traces the origins and nature of the social and cultural conflicts that occurred in Europe just prior to World War II in terms, I believe, have an eerie resonance for U.S. society today.

I had intended this week to go back almost 200 years to explore the thoughts of Edmund Burke, one of the most erudite authors of the era that gave rise to the political power of Ortega Y Gasset's "masses" and Wildavsky's "egalitarians." But I think I shall leave the venture into Burke's world for a later date.

Instead, I thought we'd continue the inquiry into what's troubling America by taking a look at a book called *Hidden History* by Daniel Boorstin, published in 1991 by Vintage Press.

Boorstin, a former Librarian of Congress, is significantly more gentle and less angry than Wildavsky, Ortega Y Gasset and certainly Burke. (To jog your memory, Boorstin's *The Discoverers* was one of four books on my last year's recommended summer reading list.)

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*Hidden History* consists of a series of essays written by Boorstin over the past 40 years. It covers a variety of subjects from the frontier days to the present, and is filled with remarkable insights into the circumstances that make America special. It is a must read for anyone who makes a living attempting to divine where the United States is headed, because it provides such a wonderful view of where the nation has been.

In the opening prologue, Boorstin describes an America that is challenged and shaped by what he calls "fertile verges," "places of encounter between something and something else . . . between kinds of landscape or seascape, between stages of civilization, between ways of thought and ways of life." During the first century of its existence, Boorstin notes, America experienced more different kinds of verges and more extensive and vivid verges than any other great modern nation.

"The long Atlantic coast, where early colonial settlements flourished, was, of course, a verge between land and sea. Every movement inward into the continent was a verge between the advanced European civilization and the stone-age culture of the American Indians, between people and the wilderness . . . As cities became sprinkled around the continent, each was a new verge between the ways of the city and those of the countryside . . . As immigrants poured in from Ireland, Germany, and Italy, from Africa and Asia, each group created new verges between their imported ways and the imported ways of their neighbors and the new-grown ways of the New World."

In ancient, more settled nations, Boorstin says, uniformity was idealized . . . the national pride of Englishman, Frenchman, German, or Italian was a pride in the special genius of his own kind. The American situation, Boorstin notes, was different. On its verges, the United States found three characteristic ways of thinking and feeling: exaggerated self-awareness; a special openness to novelty and change; a strong community-consciousness.

This unique circumstance produced a special kind of politician in the early days of the Republic. In a chapter on the Adamses, Boorstin introduces us to the second president, John Adams, who lost his bid for reelection because he refused to be a party man, even for the Federalist Party, which his political philosophy had helped to found. "I have never sacrificed my judgment," Adams insisted, "to kings, ministers, nor people, and I never will."

Adams could not, of course, be elected to any office in today's world of TV personality contests. Of himself he said, "I lack magnetism frightfully, and I have no facility of doing the right thing at the right time. I am frightfully deficient in tact; I never can remember faces or names, and so I am by nature disqualified. I never could be a popular man . . . I never could overcome my pre-natal manner, and learn to say gracious things in a gracious way."

His son, John Quincy Adams, the nation's sixth president, similarly angered the Federalists by voting against the party line when he was a Senator from Massachusetts. His response? "As to holding my seat in the Senate of the United States without exercising the most perfect freedom of agency, under the sole and exclusive control of my own sense of right, that is out of the question." Sound familiar? Of course not.

In a remarkable series of succeeding chapters, Boorstin discusses the development of America's unique political philosophy and its legal system; the effects of its "apartness" from the rest of the world; national debates over "equality" and "democracy;" and the social consequences of the astounding technological change that has occurred in the past century.

Finally, we come to America today. And we find a nation where John Adams and his son would not only be unelectable, but uncomfortable. We find a government run by what Boorstin terms the "nationally advertised president." And we find a political environment dominated by what Boorstin calls "pseudo-events."

The first "nationally advertised president," according to Boorstin, was Franklin Roosevelt, who he says benefited from a personal genius for communication and extraordinary advances in communications technology which allowed the president to address the public directly via radio, and which allowed the nation to communicate back via the telegram and an efficient mail service.

In a typical and delightful embellishment, Boorstin offers a poem by Carl Carmer, published by Pocket Books on April 18, 1945, six days after Roosevelt's death.

. . . I never saw him--  
But I knew him. Can you have forgotten  
How, with his voice, he came into our house,  
The President of these United States,  
Calling us friends. . . .  
Do you remember how he came to us  
That day twelve years ago--a little more--  
And you were sitting by the radio  
(We had it on the kitchen table then)  
Your head down on your arms as if asleep.

The "happy coincidence" of Roosevelt's personal talent with technological opportunity, Boorstin notes, eventually produced a dark side. The opportunity for the president to make news became his duty. The citizen now found no respite from a barrage of politics and government. "Even over a beer at his favorite bar, he was likely to hear the hourly news broadcast, or the voice of the president."

This in turn led to direct citizen response, and this to a temptation for public officials, and especially the president, "to trim his sails to the shifting winds of opinion, which now sometimes blew with hurricane force into Washington offices."

"The weak representative or the demagogue would find it easier to be weak and yet to seem to be strong by following the majority view at every turn. Here was still another force to prevent the realization of Edmund Burke's ideal of the independent representative." Never before, Boorstin continues, "has it been so easy for a statesman to seem to lead millions while in reality tamely echoing their ever shifting mood and inclination."

Boorstin points out that Shakespeare divided great men into three classes: those born great, those who achieved greatness, and those who had greatness thrust upon them. It never occurred to Shakespeare, he notes, to mention the fourth category: "those who hire public relations experts and press secretaries to make themselves look great."

Inevitably, the increased importance of the press's role in creating "great men," led to the development of what Boorstin calls "pseudo-events." These are the staged happenings, so ubiquitous in politics today they have virtually eliminated the possibility of the public gaining any spontaneous insight into the real thoughts and lives of our elected representatives.

Boorstin's discussion of "pseudo-events" is fascinating. I can't begin to do it justice in so short a space. But his basic point is that press conferences, TV interview shows, presidential debates, trial balloons in the press, and the whole array of modern political gimmicks have succeeded in reducing the great national issues to trivial dimensions, to mere "sound bites."

The nation, he says, judges its politicians today more often than not on the basis of TV performances that favor two-and-a-half minute answers. These pseudo-events lead to emphasis on pseudo-qualifications, he notes. "If we test presidential candidates by their talents on TV quiz performances, we will, of course, choose presidents for precisely these qualifications." Yet, he says, with the possible exception of FDR, all the great presidents in our history would have done miserably in this environment, while our most notorious demagogues would have shone.

Another consequence of this growth in the importance of media is public confusion between celebrities, whom Boorstin describes as "human pseudo-events," and true heroes, whom he describes, in terms reminiscent of Ortega Y Gasset, as individuals distinguished by achievement. This confusion, Boorstin says, has come dangerously close to depriving the nation of all real role models.

And this brings us to Boorstin's version of the problem highlighted by both Wildavsky and Ortega Y Gasset. For the following quote I go not to *Hidden History*, but to an earlier Boorstin book called *The Image*, published in 1965, from which the essay in *Hidden History* on pseudo-events was taken.

"In the United States, we have, in a word, witnessed the decline of the 'folk' and the rise of the 'mass.' The usually illiterate folk, while unself-conscious, was creative in its own special ways. Its characteristic products were the spoken word, the gesture, the song: folklore, folk dance, folk song. The folk expressed itself. Its products are still gathered by scholars, antiquarians, and patriots; it was a voice.

"But the mass, in our world of mass media and mass circulation, is the target and not the arrow. It is the ear and not the voice. The mass is what others aim to reach-by print, photograph, image, and sound. While the folk created heroes, the mass can only look and listen for them. It is waiting to be shown and to be told.

"Our society, to which the Soviet notion of 'the masses' is so irrelevant, still is governed by our own idea of the mass. The folk had a universe of its own creation, its own world of giants and dwarfs, magicians and witches. The mass lives in a very different fantasy

world of pseudo-events. The words and images which reach the mass disenchant big names in the very process of conjuring them up."

So there you have it. Three recommendations for great summer reading in a year when television is dominated by ugly images of a political system gone seriously awry.

As I said in an earlier piece, I don't claim that these books will explain George Bush's apparent meltdown, the Democratic party's quadrennial insistence on embracing a flawed candidate, or the public's enchantment with a populist billionaire. But I think they go a long way toward explaining the environment in which these events are occurring. And in doing so, I think they provide some valuable insights, some food for thought as it were, into the types of political and social conflicts the nation will be encountering in the 1990s.

The bottom line is that the United States is in the midst of a vast and complex cultural war, a war that I think will heat up significantly now that the cold war is over and Americans can begin to focus more of their attention on domestic affairs.

I am personally optimistic that Wildavsky's egalitarians and the masses of Ortega Y Gasset and Boorstin will fail to reduce U. S. society to a complete cultural wasteland. But this outcome is by no means certain. The one assurance we have is that this war will influence the financial markets throughout the coming decade. The winners in this arena will be those who best understand the nature of the conflict.

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