The Genius of Our Success

By Michael J. Robinson

Henry Luce was right. It has been the American Century. But 1999, the last year of that American Century, has also been an "American Year," what with a continuing expanding economy, a fatality-free military victory, and an ever-increasing recognition that the United States is the world's only high-tech superpower.

Whatever Luce considered to be the genius of our success now no longer matters. But, alas, as the century ends, our considerations do matter. And the most important question is this: what do the American people believe to be the genius that underlies their notions of American national triumph during the last 100 years?

The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press recently completed a national survey of public attitudes concerning the last century. Pew asked "history" questions of all shapes and sizes. One question asked respondents what has been the nation's greatest single failure in this century—a reasonable measure of our presumed "collective memory" about American history. Pew also asked items with far more limited applications to understanding the American political regime—for example, whether the invention of Viagra has been a good thing or a bad thing for the country as a whole.

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Editor's Note*— If you're a modernist, you probably believe that the 20th century ends this December 31.*

But if you're a traditionalist, perhaps even a purist, you are probably insisting that the logic and arithmetic of the thing are unassailable: this century will not end until next year; not until December 31, 2000.

Public Perspective has chosen to waffle on the issue. Which is to say we've decided to publish a collection of fin de siècle articles in both years—starting now and continuing on into the spring of the year 2000. These pieces are based primarily on survey research conducted earlier this year by the Pew Research Center. The initial findings—those dealing with public attitudes assessing the last 100 years—were published by Pew in July 1999. And a second report—about public predictions for the next 100 years—is being released this month.

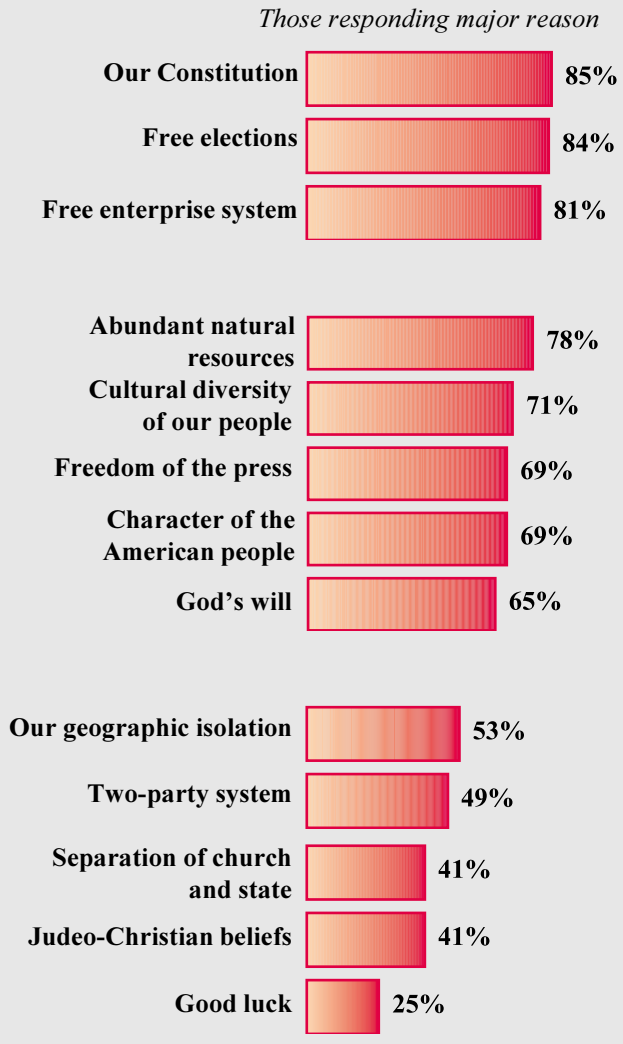
We have asked Michael Robinson, who served as a consultant to Pew in all phases of the Millennium surveys project, to come out of retirement from academia and write these articles. Our readers may remember that before Robinson retired, he was a frequent contributor to Public Opinion magazine, where he made "interpretation" and "attitude" two of his specialties.

In the upcoming articles, Robinson returns to analyzing public opinion with a broad sense of interpretation, a genuine commitment to attitude, and an appreciation for delicious irony.

Figure 1

We the People

Question: ...As I read a list, tell me whether you think each thing is a major reason, a minor reason or not a reason that America has been so successful in this century... Do you think this is a major reason, a minor reason or not a reason for America's success?



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Pew Research Center, April 6-May 6, 1999.

But Pew also asked a question never asked before—an item that gives people the chance to do a little model-building about their own history—specifically, we asked *why* "America has been successful during the past century."

And, as century's end fast approaches, it's an appropriate time to present the findings about the genius, if not the secret, of our success; to state which factors are—and which factors are not—in the public's world view central causes of our success; and to reveal what people think precipitated our emergence as numero uno.

How to do all that? Pew gave respondents 13 possible choices, as it turns out one for each of the original colonies. Respondents were asked whether each of these choices—factors, really—constituted a *major* reason for our success, or something less than major. From least to most, here's the public's take on what have been the major causes of our achievements as a nation during this American Century.

"Good luck" came in dead last on the list of causes. And "the Constitution" came in first on the list, but was followed very closely by "free elections" (see Figure 1).

Of course, a simple listing doesn't tell us as much as we want to know about the ways in which Americans explain their shared success. One learns more looking for patterns in the list, uncovering factors that reveal something deeper about publicly-held political theory.

So we've done just that—reassessed the list of specifics to find more theory in public thinking. We started out with the admittedly arbitrary decision to regroup the findings. We divided the thirteen factors into three separate groups—levels, really.

Level one represents the "consensus factors"—causes that 80% or more of the sample regarded as major. Level two includes those factors garnering 65% or more of the possible "votes" respondents could cast.

Level three we classify as "so-so." Those "so-so" factors which sit way at the bottom of the list we also think of as the also-rans. But we still consider them to be a part of the third level.

And having performed triage on the original list we have uncovered patterns that go beyond the specific choices. We've also uncovered more than a few important lessons about the nature of American political thinking.

The "so-so" category tells us two things: First, Americans don't buy into the notion that their 20th century history is a matter of serendipity. Obviously, the best evidence for this is the response to the question about "good luck." Only a quarter of the public says "good luck" is a major factor in any of this.

But there's another element as well. At the top of the "so-so" group is the choice of "geographic isolation" as a reason for success. Just over half consider it a major reason. Still, if anything represents "good luck," it *is* our geographic isolation.

American schoolchildren are typically taught that two oceans

have protected us since the very beginning of nationhood. And, one might well assume that these schoolchildren understand both oceans are where they are more as a matter of luck than of design. But either the kids were absent for that lesson or, now, as adults, they just don't accept the theory that the oceans or luck have had any real effect. We don't see much in our history as a function of fortuity.

The "so-so" category also suggests that the American way of *practicing* religion, or dealing with church versus state issues, has little effect on how well we've done. Ours is a non-denominational view of American history.

> "We salute Constitutionalism; Capitalism; the Melting Pot; and just about anything which begins with the adjective 'free' or the noun 'freedom.'"

Even if a significant portion of the public considers America to be a Christian nation, that doesn't translate into building a model of American history. About half the population considers Judeo-Christian values as less than a major factor in explaining what's happened to us. Even the church-state issue, per se, is considered ancillary.

There's probably a partisan division that helps explain this surprising finding. Fundamentalists probably think that Judeo-Christian beliefs matter a lot; secular humanists, on the other hand, probably consider separation of church and state as a cause for American greatness. But, in those opinions, these two groups cancel each other out; so neither factor ranks high for the total population.

One's personal religion, therefore, is not viewed as a factor in America's historical development. The path of American history is not regarded as a sectarian crusade.

The next five choices—those meeting the 65% and over criterion—are something of a mixed bag, but there are some subtle patterns here as well. First, and probably most important, is that Americans think like "culturists." In the culturists' model we've succeeded because we built a melting pot. And in the public's estimation, the melting pot has worked and enhanced our viability.

"The character of the American people" and "the diversity" of the population are both considered important causes of our history. Seven in ten think both of these elements have been of major importance to us. In the public's eye, we have produced a kind of culture—a sociological mix—that helps us to succeed.

Second, God-fearing, faith-holding Americans offer up a distilled and denatured religion in explaining their success. As above, sectarianism provides no real advantage to us as a nation. But God does, generally, provide. Americans are as much "providentialist" in their thinking as they are culturist. Providence has surely helped us; "God's will" has aided us. But his help is general to his will, not specific to our separate faiths.

The story is that Bismarck once attempted to explain the emergence of America as a world power. He claimed that God looks after dogs, little children, and the United States of America. It was a remark that is itself providentialist: God helps us, but not through specific faiths or denominations.

It might surprise most journalists to see that "freedom of the press" is still considered important by two-thirds of the public in achieving something positive in America. Media have not been very popular institutions in the 1990s, but 69% of us still consider press freedom to be a major plus in our development. The explanation may be that the press is considered a legitimate political institution, and political institutions do very well in this survey, as we shall soon see.

At the top of the list are the three consensus factors—things that almost everybody sees as significant and helpful. They are free enterprise, free elections, and the Constitution, per se. Let's start with free enterprise. Americans have adopted more than a little economic determinism in building a model of American history. As we see it, we succeed because we are wealthy enough to do so. And we are wealthy because we are capitalists.

It's interesting that the public also attributes great significance to our natural resources—a factor that some might consider as not much more than good luck. But it's possible that those who regard the luck factor of geographic isolation as insignificant still consider resources to be important because resources bolster capitalism. And that's a big plus.

It's fitting, really, that in the decade during which Communism has come close to breathing its last, the People—the American people at any rate—widely accept the basic premise that what's good for business is good for the USA.

Still, at base, the public proves to be, of all things and above all else, *institutionalist.* We've prevailed because we have pluralist—free—political institutions to serve and protect us. Attitudes toward the Constitution are the greatest symbol of our institutionalist sensibilities. Hence the "score" of 85% for the Constitution as a major factor. But "free elections" do as well. Taken together, political institutions trump capitalism when the public is asked to reason out the genius of America.

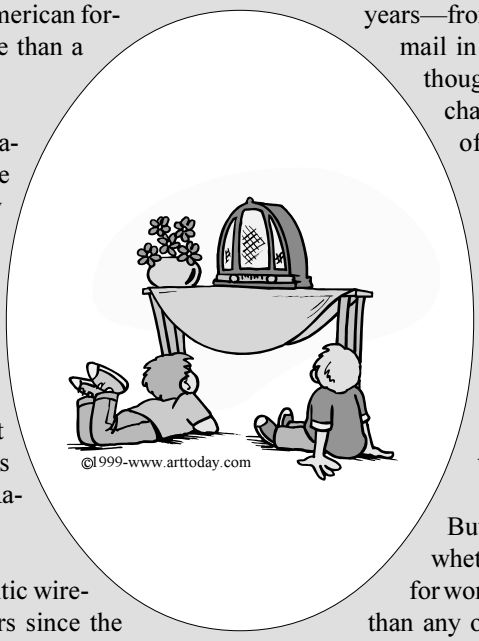
"Radio Days"

Sociologists have been telling us for decades that "old media" will never die. What may come as a surprise is that the "old media" don't ever seem to fade away.

Perhaps the best historical example of old media's longevity is the lowly magazine—a "print source" in the vernacular of modern media research—created in its American format by Benjamin Franklin in 1741, more than a quarter of a millennium ago.

Back then there was one American magazine in print. Now there are 18,000, and the number is increasing—last year by nearly 1,100.

Looking at *this* century's oldest medium, even our youth-obsessed culture loves the radio when it's old and grey. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center Millennium Survey, the radio is our most appreciated. The survey suggests that this isn't just the American Century, it's the Radio Century, too.



It's been 98 years since the first transatlantic wireless transmission and more than 70 years since the National Broadcasting Company, referred to now only as NBC, came into existence. NBC, the first company organized solely to operate as a radio network, no longer exists as a radio network per se.

But, seven decades later, radio still "sells." The average American family owns about six radios, and there are two-thirds as many radio stations as there are magazines. And, the Pew survey shows us that radio is as prized as it is ubiquitous.

In that survey, Pew researchers posed questions about 32 very different changes that have taken place during the last 100 years—from the creation of radio to the spread of e-mail in the 1990s. They asked whether people thought of each of these developments as a change for the better, the worse, or not much of a change at all.

When it comes to impact—whether any or all of these changes were consequential—radio came in tied for first place, ranking right up there with the automobile as a change that really has made a difference. Ninety-seven percent of Americans consider the emergence of both radio and the automobile as changes that matter in the way we live our lives.

But, when it comes to what *kind* of impact—whether the changes wrought are for better or for worse—we think more favorably about radio than any other 20th century invention, even cars. Among people who think the radio has been consequential, 99% say it has changed our lives for the better. Somewhat fewer—94%—say the same of cars.

And what about television? Not even close, really. Among those who see a difference in life because of television (94% of these things are considered major factors in bringing about the American Century, a century of success and improvement.

In fact, it may well be that the overarching commitment to our political institutional framework explains why even the press has done so well in this survey. The media are riding the coattails of American institutionalist thinking. Only political parties—the two party system—fail to ride the coattails of our institutionalism, and that may simply reflect our deep-seated aversion to anything that trafficks in partisanship.

No matter which way one reads these numbers there is one conclusion that is undeniable: Americans have bought into the system. We salute Constitutionalism; Capitalism; the Melting Pot; and just about anything which begins with the adjective "free" or the noun "freedom." All of

More surprising perhaps is the "institutionalistic" nature of public thinking about the American Century. Americans are not generally considered to be at all interested in institutions, nor are they considered to be very political. But in this survey, Americans build a model of their 20th century history which is both political and institutionalist.

Political institutions are the most important factor in their model. Economics is a close second. And religion—sectarian religion—is regarded as a lesser factor. Given that ordering,

the total), the percentage regarding that difference as a plus was just 78—more than 20 points behind radio. Actually even "e-mail" does better than television. Eighty-nine percent of those who think e-mail has changed our lives think it has been a plus.

Several other "new media" do okay in these rankings. The internet scores a 79. Cable TV and cell phones each earn a 75.

People can—and do—argue about whether the computer is a mass medium or something else again. Whichever it is, computers *are* popular. Ninety-five percent of all respondents consider computers as a significant development, and 92% of them think that on balance the coming of the computer has been a good thing.

It's not too surprising that personal computers do much better in terms of public image than does the internet, the latter having been tied increasingly by the press to one form or another of the Dark Side. Somehow, someway, the internet has been linked more closely to the devil than has the PC. One in five Americans feel we'd be better off if the 'net had never been invented!

The least surprising finding in this inventory of attitudes toward 20th century creations is this: we hate telemarketing. The only good news for the telemarketing industry is that about a fifth of the public thinks telemarketing hasn't made a difference one way or another. Among those who do regard telemarketing as consequential, a meager 29% see the impact as positive, which puts telemarketing down there with nuclear weapons and rap music as things we think we'd be better off without.

Nobody should be surprised that Americans rank telemarketing, rap, and nuclear weapons as bad inventions. But we should be surprised to see that radio ranks at the top of the list. Not just because radio is so low-tech, but also because radio has just emerged from a decade in which the "news" about radio has been rotten. "Shock-jock" radio; "Tabloid" radio; "Right-wing" radio; all have been focuses for attack, by the Left, the Right, and even the media establishment itself.

So, "why radio?" Maybe part of the answer lies ironically in its agedness. Maybe we tend to respect our "elders" more than we realize.

But the best explanation may lie in radio's *pluralism*. With radio, every niche audience has a station or network in which to niche. Radio has become the biggest of the narrow-casted, broadcast media. With radio, every listener can—and does—seek his or her own level. Radio's denominator is least-common, most-common, or even greater than common, if one listens in on NPR. Every audience and every consumer is being served; in any location; at any time, and at a very low cost for the programming and for the equipment.

Whatever the reasons, nobody should conclude that radio is our passion. The passion days of radio are long since over. But radio has become big enough, broad enough, mobile enough—and cheap enough—to please virtually *everybody*. So it winds up being our most popular 20th century invention. Mr. Marconi, take a bow.

— Michael J. Robinson

(For additional data on the topic, see pages 8-9.)

James Madison would probably be delighted, Karl Marx, frustrated. And Pat Robertson should probably be appalled. Finally, having referenced Marx and Robertson, there is one other issue to be addressed. Who wins this game of public historical modeling? Is it the Left or is it the Right? It seems to have ended in a tie.

Both sides, of course, root for the Constitution and free elections. So there is no advantage there.

Conservatives, however, worship free enterprise. And liberals typically kneel at the altar of cultural diversity. Yet, both those factors do very well in this survey, with a slight advantage to free enterprise, which ought to give comfort to the Right. But conservatives are also very enthusiastic about the need for teaching Judeo-Christian values as a road to American self-improvement. Yet, the religious factor, other than a belief in God's will, proves to be *under*whelming, which ought to give some comfort to the Left.

If either side is to win this debate between liberal and conservative models of American achievement, we'll have to take the game into overtime. And there is little surprise in that. Americans, never known for their ideological fervor or their focus on political institutions, have always been known to wind up at the Center. And in this exercise in explaining America, they wind up there once again.