

“Collective Memory”

From the 20s through the 90s: The way we think we were

By Michael J. Robinson

Robert Dole says the strangest things. But it didn't start with weird commercials about the heartbreak of “E.D.” Back in 1996, Dole said something even more curious. Surprisingly, during his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, Dole promised the nation that, if elected, he'd move America backward, to the past.

Not so surprising was Bill Clinton's response. In his acceptance speech, Clinton promised that if re-elected, he'd move the nation forward, to the future.

Least surprising of all: Clinton won.

Dole's speech was obviously a big mistake. But, actually, he'd been giving it for years. Born in 1923, Dole said he remembered the past because he'd been there, he *knew* it was a better America back then.

Dole's remembrances are both personal and experiential. But what about the rest of “us,” the public? As a public, we could not possibly have been “there.” Still, we can have *impressions* about the nation's past. And recently, social scientists have taken to calling these impressions our “collective memory.”

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Carl Jung actually offered up some ideas about the “collective unconscious” three-quarters of a century ago, so collective memory has a lineage as old as psychoanalysis. But whether one has a Jungian perspective or a more

lective memory correspond with the pretty picture Dole painted? And if it doesn't, what is the shape of Americans' “memories?”

More important in building a theory is the “existential” question: Do Americans really have a meaningful—shared—collective memory? And, tied directly to that is the “size,” or “variability” question: Is there more—or less—collective memory about the old days than the more recent past?

As usual, there's also a methodological question. If “collective memory” does exist, is there a legitimate way to measure it? Obviously, survey research is a reasonable option. Survey research is, after all, the aggregation of individual impressions.

In April and May 1999, the Pew Research Center polled more than 1,500 people, asking scores of questions about America's past—things like public perceptions about the progress made these last fifty years, or whether individuals remember

where they were when they heard Ronald Reagan had been shot. Luckily for us, Pew also included a novel item we can refer to as the “decades question.”

People were asked, “What word or phrase best describes your impression of the 1920s?; the 1930s?,” and so forth. Decade by decade, here's a compendium of the way we *think* we were these last eighty years—a *fin de siècle* photograph of our collective memories.



modern take on all this, “collective memory” is still less a theory than a notion—one that seems to provide more questions than answers.

That's where Bob Dole comes in. It's Dole's memories that provide us with questions that might lead to some answers about “collective memory.”

For starters, there's the “shape” of our collective memory: Does American col-

The 20s: “Roaring” Then; “Boring” Now

Unlike any other decade, the '20s obligate us to adopt a cliché for a label. When asked to describe the '20s, people offer up the same word: “roaring.” And if their preferred modifier isn't “roaring,” it is quite likely to be a synonym: “swinging,” “care-free,” “wild,” or “wide-open.”

Consider the numbers. Nearly two-thirds of respondents express an opinion of some kind about the '20s. (From here on out I use the word “expressives” in referring to people who actually answered the question).

Among the “expressives,” 47% depict the '20s as being fun—“Spring Break” for adult America. References are either about living it up, or about the symbols of doing just that: “Flappers;” “swing;” “the Charleston;” “speakeasies;” “prohibition;” “bathtub gin.” But, every other noun, adjective or gerund pales in contrast to “r-o-a-r-i-n-g.” One in seven of the “expressives” (14%) says specifically that “roaring” is the single best word to encapsulate the decade.

So, the '20s are definitely roaring in the American collective memory. But they are mostly boring for us, as students of collective memory. It's not so much that we're duty-bound to use a label that is hackneyed. Asking people about the '20s doesn't tell us much that's exciting, other than this: there *is* a collective memory about that era.

The '30s: “Hard Times”

There also appears to be a meaningful collective memory about the '30s. And, again, the best label offers no surprises: I've called the era “Hard Times.”

Among the “expressives,” 60% speak about the '30s in terms of “struggle,” “poverty,” “sadness,” and, of course, “Depression,” with a capital “D”—the semi-official word for this decade. In

fact, among the “expressives,” 33% use the very word “Depression” as their term of choice. But the responses to the '30s question suggest some problems with our theory.

Forty-two percent decline to say *anything* about the '30s—the record level of “declination” for any decade. And “decliners” prove to be numerous among demographic groups one would presume to be very much aware of the era.



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Among those who have graduated from college, nearly a *third* (31%) go mute when asked to say anything about the '30s. And, in the black community—whose fundamental political loyalties shifted dramatically during the '30s *because* of the Depression—the figure reaches 58%.

Perhaps it's Democrats who surprise most. The '30s may have saved the national Democratic party from political oblivion. But, as of today, 41% say nothing about their party's salvation, or about anything else relating to the '30s.

This *is* the Depression we're talking about here. Even so, there's a big gap in our collective recall. And that gap tells us

that collective memory about some of our public past is ephemeral, even chimerical. What is surprising is that so much “collective amnesia” occurs here, during an era so integral to our history.

Collective memory about the '30s is also surprisingly apolitical. For an epoch one might expect to be remembered as very political, responses to the “decades question” indicate otherwise. Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal stand at the center of the '30s. But a mere one percent of all the references to the '30s allude to Roosevelt, the New Deal, or the programs associated with either.

The '30s also provides evidence that *some* people actually do view hard times nostalgically. There is *near* consensus that the '30s were miserable. But just under 15% of the “expressives” dissent, proffering a view of the '30s as a time of hope, safety, or rebuilding. What's more, those who actually lived during the Depression are most likely to feel that way. Somehow, 21% of the expressive elderly remember the Depression *favorably*. Old and nostalgic, these folks might well be thought of as “Dolesters.”

The '40s: “The Not-So-Big One”

In colloquial American, the Second World War is known as “the Big One”—a sobriquet that reflects the scope of the conflict and the righteousness of the cause. World War II was—and is—central to 20th century American history. If the public did *not* regard the '40s as the “war years,” there'd be grounds for declaring the concept of “collective memory” a failure here and now.

Collective memory passes this test, but not with distinction. Among “expressives,” 54% describe the decade in words that translate easily into the “Big One,” references that start with “Pearl Harbor” and end with “Hiroshima.”

But again, we face the nemesis of “declination.” The number of respondents



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The '50s: "Happy Days" and "Modernity"

I had expected the '50s to be something of a bagatelle. That I'd discover the '50s to be little more than a national joke. As it turns out, the '50s *are* remembered collectively as a trifle. But, in another tasty irony, the '50s also turn out to be a watershed. In our recall of the '50s, collective memory achieves modernity.

Public impressions of the '50s are just about what one would expect, especially if one is a Garry Marshall fan. One of TV's most successful producers, Marshall spent much of the '70s and '80s creating sitcoms about the '50s.

Marshall gave us "Laverne and Shirley," a sitcom about two simple-minded '50s girls working in a Milwaukee brewery. Through eight successful seasons, they continually engaged in '50s-style high-jinks but never once behaved like Ally McBeal.

Marshall also gave us "Happy Days," a fabulously successful sitcom about almost nothing, but a nothingness that

was always presented in a frivolous '50s mode. "Happy Days" ran eleven seasons and had a cult following long before it ever went to reruns.

"Laverne and Shirley" and "Happy Days" made Marshall a fortune, and made television history. But what makes Marshall's programming relevant to us is that it also seems to have "made" collective memory. What the public says about the '50s corresponds near-perfectly with the images and themes served up by "Happy Days." *Nobody* mentions Joe McCarthy. Despite the loss of nearly 40,000 American lives, a meager one percent mentions the war in Korea. No, it's Richie Cunningham's life that serves as a template for almost everything Americans remember about the era.

A fifth of all respondents speak in terms of happiness, optimism and fun. Another fifth make reference to pop-cultural icons that were at the core of the "Happy Days" state of mind. Half those references are to "rock-n-roll." The rest are vintage '50s stereotypes: Elvis; cool cars; family values; television; the baby-boom. Pop-culture and the "good life" account for 42% of all impressions.

Correlation is not, as they say, causality. There is no proof here that Garry Marshall manufactured our collective memory about this decade.

who decline to answer the '40s question is virtually identical to the number who mention the "Big One." And there is a third group here which does *not* think of the '40s as the war years.

It is only by the slimmest plurality that respondents define the decade in terms of war. Nearly two-thirds do not. The '40s, as seen through the prism of collective memory, are the era of the "Not-So-Big-One."

What renders "the Big One" not-so-big? Youth is part of the problem. Almost half (47%) of the under-30 crowd decline to answer the '40s question. But it's also the oldest Americans who somehow fail to reach the level of consensus that the '40s were the "war years."

Fifteen percent of expressive seniors label the '40s as "good years," or years of patriotism and national unity. That's nearly four times the percentage for the other age groups sampled. As was the case for the '30s, there exists here a disproportionate share of the old who are nostalgic about an era most Americans consider a tribulation. Though few in number, the "Dolesters" are at it again.



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But media maven Marshall is, himself, a metaphor for what happens to collective memory, beginning with the '50s and continuing on until the '80s. In our recall of the '50s, collective memory goes modern. And at the heart of this particular hybrid of "modernism" is an increasingly mass-mediated collective thought.

It's not until the '50s that the collective recall of any given decade comports almost entirely with what the media give us. Until television begins defining our decades, collective memory tracks with history, not with sitcoms. Garry Marshall and "Happy Days" are symbols of those changes.

The modernity of collective memory manifests itself in several ways, all of which tie into mass media. To begin, when people remember the '50s, they mention the media. When thinking about the '20s, nobody mentions vaudeville. When thinking about the '30s, nobody mentions movies. And nobody considers radio, popular as it is with virtually every American, to be the symbol of any decade.

But when thinking about the '50s, one percent do mention TV. Another one percent mentions specific programs. Granted, two percent isn't much. But, compare that to "history." Almost twice as many people remember the '50s for trivial television as for the anything-but-trivial "Cold War."

Collective thinking about mid-century also goes to celebrity. Until people start recalling the '50s, nobody uses celebrity to define an era. But for the '50s we do. About 3% of the public cite Elvis Presley as being the very best symbol of the age. History and historians may consider these to be the "Eisenhower Years." But there are almost *seventimes* as many references to Elvis as to Ike.

Thinking about the era has one final, modern element. When the public starts recalling the '50s, the public also begins to express itself a whole lot more. There's



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been no mention made here either to "expressives" or to "decliners." All the percentages relating to this decade have been based on everybody in the survey. The reason? Starting with the this decade, the level of "declination" declines.

Between the '20s and the '40s, nearly 40% of the public has no answer for the "decades question." For the '50s through the '90s that percentage is cut in half. The biggest dropoff comes in the "Happy Days" era. With the '50s we leave behind the middle ages of "don't know" and enter the modern age of expression.

The '60s: The Cultural Revolution, American Style

It's easy to make a case that the '60s were two separate eras. "Camelot," the "Great Society" and "Motown" symbolize the first. "Haight-Ashbury," Vietnam, and the Beatles epitomize the second.

But collective memory draws no such distinction. The '60s are remembered overwhelmingly for what transpired after 1965. As to symbols, the first half of the decade draws a collective-memory blank.

People do remember *events* of the early '60s. In fact, the single most memorable event of the entire century is the Kennedy assassination of 1963; 90% of those sur-

veyed remember exactly where they were when they heard the news. And yet, when asked to offer an overall impression of the '60s, it's as if the first five years hadn't happened or didn't matter.

What does matter are the two faces of the late '60s: social change and political upheaval. When reconstructing the '60s in their minds, almost 30% of the public thinks "sociologically." And another 20% thinks "politically." No other category of collective memory even comes close. When one says "the '60s," one says "sociology" or "politics," or one says nothing at all.

For the first time, however, we face the problem of two *major* collective memories existing simultaneously. And a split like that raises the question of a collective memory versus contradictory collective memories.

In this instance, the issue is soluble. In the '60s, the sociological was the political, and the political was the sociological. "Hippies," flower children, and "Woodstock" are, as examples, mainly sociology. The anti-war movement and the civil rights movement are mainly politics. But all of these symbols are parts of a socio-political whole. Together they stand for the "American Cultural Revolution"—*the* collective memory of this important epoch.



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What makes the '60s unique is that they are remembered by the general public as "political" years. In fact, unless one defines war as "political"—a debatable proposition, especially for World War II—then the '60s are the *only* political decade in "memory".

And yet the '60s have been tagged with a moniker that is anything but political. Whether you lived then or not, chances are you've heard the '60s were the era of "sex, drugs and rock-n-roll."

That label describes the truth, but definitely not the *whole* truth. Two percent of respondents do mention "free love" and "open marriage" assigns of the times. Three percent mention drugs, LSD, or psychedelics. And another 3% mention rock-n-roll. So sex, drugs and rock-n-roll are a part of our '60s images.

But the label is misleading. "Sex, drugs and rock-n-roll" depicts this most political of decades as an apolitical bacchanalia. Yet our survey-based reminiscence *is*

political, sometimes even ideological. In fact, more people say the '60s are best remembered as "liberal" (4%) than say they are best remembered as drug-addled.

Let's give credit where due. It takes a lot to get Americans to reminisce in political terms. The '60s had what it takes.

The '70s: Decade Disco

If the '60s had what it takes, the '70s definitely did *not*. No decade fails as badly as the '70s in getting the public to think politically, let alone seriously.

Ask a sophisticate what typifies the '70s and there's a good chance he or she will mention Richard

Nixon, the Watergate scandals or the constitutional crisis they engendered. Pew asked the man and woman on the street that question, and the answer turns out to be disco dancing, music and designer drugs. Precisely one-quarter of all respondents remember the '70s in terms of popular culture. Another tenth answer in social terms, typically saying the '70s were about "fun."

The big non-story is politics. Neither the war in Vietnam, which ended, finally, in 1975, nor the Nixon presidency which ended, abruptly, in 1974, comes close to being a major shared memory. There are nearly three times as many references to disco and John Travolta (6%) as to Vietnam, Watergate, and Nixon combined. Few as they are, Travolta, alone, gets nearly three times as many references as does Nixon.

Why do the two horsemen of the '70s apocalypse—Nixon and Watergate—do so "badly?" Perhaps the best explanation is that *no* political crisis imprints itself on

the mass psyche unless it reaches deep down through the social order, and not just to the level of the cognoscenti. Together, Nixon and Watergate rocked the Establishment. But they merely bumped against the public at large.

There's one more thing about the '70s. The tendency for the young to trivialize reaches its peak with this era. For almost every decade, the young "remember" a more foolish past. But for the '70s the gap between the young and the not-so-old is extraordinary. Among those under 30, 38% define the '70s "pop-culturally." For those over 50, that figure is just 7%. Somehow, war and constitutional crises notwithstanding, the '70s produce a level of banality in the thinking of young Americans that goes unmatched.

The '80s: "Me," Or Nothing At All

Tom Wolfe said that the '70s were the "Me Decade." But if public opinion is the standard, Wolfe was off by around ten years. There are about four times as many people who regard the '80s—as opposed to the '70s—as an era of "meism." Adding together those who mention "meism" with those who feel that conspicuous consumption, crass materialism, and "yuppies" are the symbols of that era, the total is 7%.

That 7% may be enough to discredit Tom Wolfe's theory, but it's hardly enough to proclaim a collective memory into existence. So, let's be more inclusive. In the context of the '80s, let's assume that money is tantamount to "meism." If we add "money items" to "meism," then the "money and me" category represents about an eighth of all respondents. That still isn't enough.

So, let's add in "hedonism": Drugs; popular music; dancing; health clubs; big or bad hair-styles, etc. If we are willing to do all that, then we *can* come up with a catch-all category that includes just over a fifth of the sample (22%).

And yet, if we assume that no collective memory is worth a name unless a third of the public mentions it, then the '80s should flunk our admittedly arbitrary test of meaningful collective recall. And flunk they do. As such, henceforth, they shall go nameless.

The '80s fail to make a name for themselves. But their failure helps to educate the rest of us about what may be the newest phase of collective memory. The '80s prove to be the first decade to flunk the test, but they are not the last. The same thing happens in the '90s, only more so. It's the beginning of a two-decade trend.

So, the '80s lack collective coherency. But do they also go wanting for any kind of *political* theme? Republican readers are probably asking themselves, "What about the Reagan Revolution?" As they say in Jersey, "Fuggetaboutit." Which is exactly what the public has done.

People are almost as unwilling to conjure Reagan in their thinking about the '80s as they were unwilling to conjure Roosevelt in their thinking about the '30s. Reagan and his revolution get 2% of the references; FDR and his New Deal got one. Think of it as "bipartisan nonpartisanship."

The '90's: Decade DotCom, or WhatEVER

"The '90s is a decade without a definition: no bumper sticker; no catch phrase, no epitaph." So concludes the Associated Press after having interviewed a goodly number of pundits, futurists and academics. In the sardonic words of Studs Terkel, "The '90s should be remembered as "The Decade of National Alzheimer's disease—forgetfulness of yesterday; forgetfulness of history."

Yes and no. In fact, there is *considerable* opinion about the '90s; nearly 90% of Pew's respondents express some word or phrase that defines the decade—a record level of expressiveness. It's just that there's so little *shared* opinion.

Public thinking about the '90s is neither collective nor amnesic. It is, for the first time, cacophonous. For the '90s, Pew came up with 27(!) separate response categories to the "decades question."

Still, there has to be one category with a plurality. And, not surprisingly, that category is "high-tech." "High-tech" references—including e-mail; the web; the 'net; computers—account for 12% of the total. So, if it's the decade of anything at all, it *is* the DotCom Decade. Or the age of "Whatever."

There are two other things worth mentioning about the '90s. First, even though "high-tech" doesn't score very many points, it does beat out some intriguing competition.

This has been the longest peace-time economic expansion in our history—and it comes close to being the longest of any kind, ever. So, this could have turned out to be the Mutual Funds Decade or the NASDAQ age. But, in spite of it all, only 5% define the '90s in economic terms.

Bill Clinton is the first impeached President in 130 years. But only 5% consider the "moral breakdown"—his or the nation's—to be the measure of our time. This is *not* the "Age of Monica." And despite all our military adventures—from Iraq on through Kosovo—almost no one (1%) mentions anything about an American imperium, or our uncontested super-power status, or even the Gulf War.

Second, Decade DotCom, such as it is, exonerates the "DotCom Generation." It's about the '90s that the young express not just the plurality opinion, but also a plurality opinion that isn't puerile. In fact, "DotComers" (between the ages of 18 and 29) outdistance every other age group in offering an impression about the '90s that emphasizes something substantive. The young are nearly twice as likely to mention high-tech as those over 30. Now that they are a part of the definition of a decade, the "DotComers" finally manage to recognize something as serious as software and hardware as symbols of an era.

So, the '90s do help to rehabilitate the young. But the '90s also serve as an indictment for anybody peddling a theory of collective memory. We decided to flunk the '80s because only a fifth of the population could agree about a particular theme. In the '90s only an eighth can agree. We now have our second failure.

Two cases do not a thesis prove. But the numbers are telling. Up until the '80s,

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That's One Giant Leap for NASA

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Suppose the public could choose an Oscar winner for “Best Public Policy in a Single Century.” Well, suppose no more.

The Pew Center is not the Film Academy, but it did ask respondents what they thought the government’s “greatest achievement” has been during these last hundred years.

Their answers are as ballots in an Oscar-style competition. And with the balloting completed, we now know the nominees and the winner of this race for the “Policy Award.”

The Nominees Are...

Asked this open-ended question about “government achievement,” precisely a third of the public answered, “Duh.” As for those who *did* make a choice, they gave answers that fit into four general categories: “prosperity;” “victory;” “partisan programs,” and finally, the Winner.

As for the winner... it isn't "Prosperity"

Americans *love* prosperity. But only 8% of those with an opinion considered ongoing “wealth and prosperity” to be the government’s greatest achievement.

Americans probably consider themselves to be the *real* winners when it comes to building a successful economy. So the government got only minimal credit for its role in what economists call fiscal policy.

...it isn't "Victory"

Vince Lombardi insisted that “winning isn’t everything; winning is the *only* thing.” Not so. Just 4% considered America’s victory in World War II as the greatest success. In fact, people gave more credit to the government for promoting public health (5%) than for beating the Nazis.

It’s been almost three generations since America defeated fascism. But it isn’t merely the passage of time operating here.

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the level of shared opinion—the *degree* of collective memory about those early decades—accounted, on average, for more than a third of all responses. Since the ’80s, the level has fallen off by about half (see Figure 1, pp. 46).



Our other great “victory”—the Cold War—is only a decade removed from today, yet only 3% cited that “victory” as the government’s finest hour.

Washington actually got more credit for waging peace than for waging war. Adding together the votes for “diplomacy,” for “America’s stature in the world,” and for the government’s role in promoting peace—the “Pax Americana”—we come up with 11% of the total vote. The victories over fascism and communism totaled just 8%.

...it isn't "Partisan Programs"

Ask a policy wonk about governmental achievement and you’re not likely to hear anything about “winning a war” or “preserving the peace.” Those things are government actions, not policies *per se*.

Wonks think programmatically. And they think about policies and programs that have some partisan or ideological underpinning. But Pew didn’t ask wonks; it asked the *public*. And the public doesn’t think “programmatically.” It thinks even less in terms of programs that are typically identified with either political party or any major political “ism.”

Culling through the data I came up with three categories of programmatic response: fiscal conservatism (balancing the

The graph of collective memory, decade by decade, produces something akin to a bell-shaped curve. For the ’20s on through the ’60s, the level of collective memory continues to increase. With the ’70s the level falls back. Then the ’80s and the ’90s are visited upon us. And neither has produced a widely shared theme. Consensus is out; dissensus is in.

federal budget); social welfarism (maintaining the “safety net”); and social justice (promoting civil rights and liberties).

Three percent of the vote went to balancing the budget; 9% to the “safety net,” and 13% to civil rights and liberties. All told, 25% of the votes cast went to these three programs, each of which *can* be tied to “conservatism” or to “liberalism.”

Not bad. But not what a wonk would have imagined. In fact, fewer votes went to all these “political” programs combined than to that one very popular program that has neither partisan nor ideological colorations...

The Envelope, Please

...And this century’s “Greatest Achievement” award goes to the producers of the Apollo project, the space shuttle program, and the Hubble telescope. In an acronym: NASA.

Sharing the award with the producers at NASA are the directors of those government programs that sponsor science and technology (S&T).

Taken together, space, technology and science got 28% of all votes cast for “greatest achievement.” That’s about three times as many ballots for space and S&T as for “peace.” And nearly four times as many for space and S&T as for “prosperity.”

The *really* big stars were space exploration and the Apollo program. Twenty-two percent of all the ballots went there. Space accounted for three-quarters of all the vote going to space *and* to S&T combined.

That space, science and technology should win this award is more than a little ironic. Americans say they love science, but they also countenance a system of education that proves their love is false, or at least shallow and fickle.

More than half the math and science teachers in America did not major, or minor, in college math or science! So, this Oscar should *not* be interpreted as evidence that Americans love science as some sort of Platonic ideal.

The “objective” reasons for this outcome are more practical

than Platonic. Americans grant this award to government-sponsored science because they think science has “helped.” Helped to improve their economy. Helped to make their travel, communication and work less burdensome. Helped to prolong their lives. Even helped America look great in the eyes of the world.

These are the practical and objective reasons. But beyond those are the cultural, and more subjective, aspects of this science thing, especially this space thing.

Remember “collective memory”? That it was more about fun than about ideas? More about celebrity than about issues? More about success than about failure? And more about anything than about ideology?

It’s all of a piece. Our specific collective memory about the government’s greatest success simply reflects generalized collective thinking about our public past. Space and science and technology *all* do well in collective recall, in part, because none of them is political and all of them are a kick.

Space, above all, wins an Oscar for “Best Policy in a Single Century” because space is most in keeping with our collective “thought process.” Space exploration is “gee-whiz” entertainment—fun. Space programs produce an ongoing supply of heroes—celebrities. And space—moon shots, particularly—put us in touch with another, older collective notion: that we are the world’s pathfinders and explorers—pioneers of accomplishment.

As an added bonus, space exploration has no partisan ideology. John Glenn and Neil Armstrong. Or Meriwether Lewis and George Rogers Clark. Government employees, all. And each made a name for himself implementing federal public policy. But each man and each policy can fairly be remembered as outside politics or partisanship of any kind.

Space is part national achievement; part national pride, and part a national theme park of the mind. It’s our space-age “Frontierland.” And nothing ought to fit better with the social-psychological dimensions of American collective thought than a place called “Frontierland.” Apparently, nothing does.

—Michael J. Robinson

But why? There are three plausible theories: “recency;” “reality;” and a “restructured” media. “Recency” theory is cognitive psychology. Recency involves nothing more profound than the notion that the closer in time the public is to “everything,” the more likely it is to remember anything. Being most recent, the last two decades should, as “recency” would have it, elicit more impressions, but no single theme.

“Reality” theory is history. The more memorable the history, the greater the shared memory. But the real history of the last twenty years has been less than cataclysmic. Without a cataclysm to recall, Americans remember many things, but few decade-defining things—no signature.

“Restructured media” involves changing information sys-

tems. Between the '20s and the '60s America increasingly relied on centralized broadcasting as its information system. But in the '70s and '80s America moved to cable. And with cable came "narrowcasting."

In the '90s America has moved again, toward the web and the 'net. So now it's "cybercasting," the most personalized form of instantaneous communication since the telephone, and the most interactive since word-of-mouth.

Narrowcasting and cybercasting render centralized mass media as nice, but not so necessary. As such, narrowcasting and cybercasting should produce a "post-

vanced in age. Not once, in any decade, did these "nostalgics" account for even a tenth of the population.

"Dolesters" remember the past as Norman Rockwell painted it. As such, they help us understand how Dole came to misinterpret American collective memory. But the general public is not nearly so Rockwellian as Dole figured it to be.

- *Finding A Common Denominator:* No single decade can symbolize eighty years of collective thinking. So, we'll have to settle for a common denominator as we attempt to describe the "shape" of collective thinking.

peevish. But Americans—especially young Americans—do bethink a history that is more a cultural cartoon than a shining city on the hill. We turn out to be not nearly so nostalgic as we think we are. The portraits of our collective memory are painted now more with the brush of a Garry Marshall than a Norman Rockwell.

- *Resolving Existential Angst:* Collective memory may be a new concept. But is it a true concept? Is there enough of it, regardless of its quality, to merit so prodigious a name?

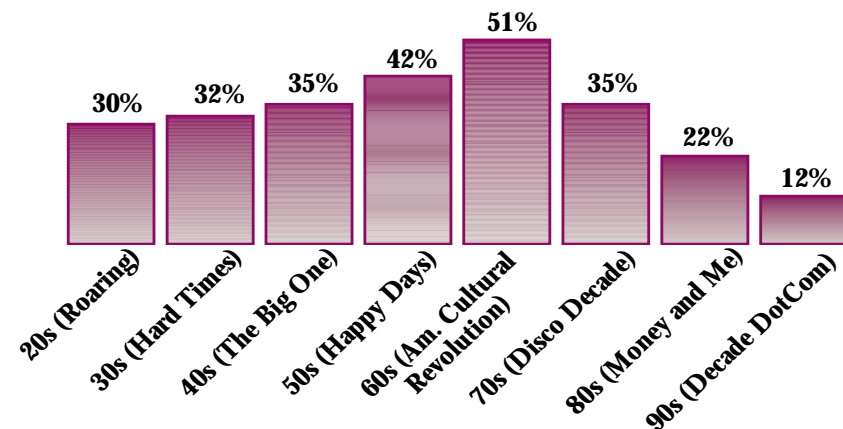
For six of the eight decades, a third of the public does express a widely shared remembrance. As they say, three out of four ain't bad. And there's a second reason to believe. The '70s are the exception; but for all the other decades, the leitmotif of public opinion at least resonates with what historians have composed. From the roaring '20s on through the DotCom '90s, the theme offered up by the public has a ring of objective truth to it.

- *Wither collective memory?* The level of collective memory has most definitely waxed and waned as we've considered these last eighty years. We have much less of it when reflecting on the more recent past compared with much earlier days. We have much more of it in recalling the "middle years" than for any other time. Given that distribution, it would appear as if we have three separate stages of collective memory: paleo; meso; and neo.

Paleo—For the '20s through the '40s, our collective memory looks to be mainly "historical." Collective memory about these decades is widely shared; it seems based in the lessons one would have learned in a decent high school social studies curriculum.

Meso—For the '50s through the '70s, collective memory transmogrifies into something much more "pop-cultural." Collective memory about these years is

Figure 1
Percent of Respondents Expressing "the" Collective Memory



Note: Collective Memory established by the plurality of responses to the "decades question."

modern" public opinion—a public opinion inherently short-lived and disparate. In the "cyberized" world of the future, any memory might well be collective. But for only about 15 minutes.

We started with four questions; we'll end up with answers to five.

- *Resurrecting Robert Dole:* There are some "Dolesters" out there—people who feel the '30s were character-building and the war years edifying. But "Dolesters" are as few in number as they are ad-

There *is* a common thread that wends its way through most of our imagined past. But it is not a reverie for America's idyllic yesteryears; it's more an impression of rollicking days-gone-by.

In our national rearview mirror we conjure up impressions of our history mostly as *fun*: the boozy '20s; the happy-go-lucky '50s; the dance-crazed '70s; the "go-go" '80s; the "wired" '90s. Even the '60s are remembered more for the excitement than for the turbulence.

My view of collective memory may seem

very wide—and shallow. And with the vivid exception of the '60s, collective memory in the middle years corresponds increasingly with the jejune images that one might pick up watching lots of prime-time television.

Neo—For the '80s and the '90s collective memories look “*kaleidoscopic*.” In this most recent phase, collective memory is characteristically fragmented and disjointed. To the degree they exist at all, our most recent impressions reflect not much of anything in particular, other than the increasingly myriad sources of information that convey them.

We should not be too deterministic about all this. If a genuine catastrophe should occur, this three-stage dialectical would probably explode. And, it's quite possible that in 50 years people *will* have a collective theme to offer about the '80s and '90s. No single survey conducted in the present can ever begin to test for that.

But the ebb and flow of public recall about these last eight decades must mean something. And as we stand at the very ebb, it's hard not to conclude that “the Era of Big Collective Memory” is over. Given the post-modern ways in which we now rediscover ourselves, it's probably going to take a lot to bring it back.

• *Bonus Question: Who Cares/SoWhat?* Suppose that even half of what's been argued here is true. Which types of people would profit from knowing it? And what might the broader implications be?

Let's start with politicians. They need to know something about collective memory, and for the most practical of reasons. Political leaders lacking good instincts about the realities of collective memory put themselves at risk. A politician who believes, for example, that Americans regard their past as a better place is a politician not likely to have much of a future.

Pollsters, journalists and political scientists all need to know something about

the exigencies of collective memory—especially its limitations. If those professionals fail, for instance, to recognize the apolitical basis of collective memory, they also put themselves at risk—at risk of writing survey questions that won't “work;” news stories that won't attract an audience; books that won't be based on a valid model of public opinion.

“Collective memory is a proverbial canary in a coal mine. If she up and dies, then we know we have a problem somewhere.”

Educators probably have the most to lose by ignoring the vicissitudes of collective memory—particularly the changing underpinnings of collective memory during the last half century. All the evidence here suggests that social studies teachers—in fact, the entire system of education—no longer play the leading role in creating our collective memory. And they haven't since the '50s or '60s.

It is an open question as to whether educators can reassert themselves in this process, can reclaim their role as inculcators of the public past. But without knowing the realities of modern collective memory, schools and teachers are almost certain to fail.

And what about the rest of us—the citizenry? What are the lessons and the implications for our republican government, given the protean size, shape and sources of collective memory?

As it was for the professions, the most important lessons and implications have to be understood in the “negative”—what misreading of collective memory

might do to us; or, more importantly, what the ongoing diminution of it might mean.

The real issue here is *political integration*—that essential element of politics that binds us to the political system, and all the other citizens within it. Collective memory is important, above all, because it is a reasonable *indicator* of how politically integrated we are. If the level—or even the quality—of collective memory is actually diminishing, that might also mean our level of political integration is somehow in jeopardy.

Collective memory is a proverbial canary in a coal mine. If she up and dies, then we know we have a problem somewhere. But collective memory is neither the coal dust nor the gas. It can't kill us; it just warns us. However interesting collective memory may be, it is an epiphenomenon—an effect much more than a cause of what really matters in the political process.

As the century ends, our canary of collective memory isn't dead. She's merely looking dissipated. So we definitely have mixed signals here. What we don't have is much hope of rebuilding a system that would resuscitate collective memory. Instead, we have a '90s America that says, “Hey, why not just buy another canary?”

At the end of the millennium we do seem to be losing our public past. We are most certainly losing our collective present. So, first, we might want to find another, more “contemporary” indicator of political integration—to transcend our need for collective memory as suggested here. Second, we might need to find other ways for ensuring a level of political integration that every pluralist government requires. We will probably do both of those things in the next century; it's just that very few Americans will remember—or even notice—that we ever needed or managed to do either. ●