

IS THIS MY COUNTRY? (Baruch Cohon, August 2016)

News reports, prices, attitudes and facts around us, now make me wonder: What is the 21st century doing to the America I live in?

In the wake of multiple killings, some by terrorists, others by and of black citizens and police officers, we need to ask questions about the country we live in. How we answer those questions could have major results.

An old song started out with an octave jump on the phrase “This is MY country, land that I love...”

Is it still mine? Can I still love it?

Guess what.

This country does not belong to the blacks, or to the police. Not to the Anglos or the Latinos or the Asiatics. Not to Christians or to Muslims, nor to Jews or to atheists. Not to males or to females or to LGBTQs. Nor to immigrants or to natives.

Natives?

Now hold on a minute. Who is a native? You might be born here, and your “illegal” parents might get deported. Are you still a native? And if you stay here and have children and grandchildren, will your family ever qualify as natives?

Face it, folks. The only people here who were always natives are those who mostly still live on reservations and eat bison meat. Even their ancestors migrated here on a prehistoric land bridge from Asia, or so we are told. That was centuries ago. The rest of us all brought more recent inherited history from other countries, other continents.

We or our forebears chose America.

Experiences over 70+ years crowd my mind these days. In the ‘40s the voting age was 21, as was the minimum age to buy liquor. Draft age was 18, and we could enlist in the Navy and Marine Corps at 17. So a few million of us, teenage servicemen in World War 2, faced the disturbing fact that we were old enough to risk our lives for our country but not old enough to buy a drink.

Those days in the military saw the introduction of female units. One song I remember from drilling in boot camp went like this:

“The WACs and WAVES’ll win the war, Parley Vous,

the WACs and WAVES’ll win the war, Parley Vous,

the WACs and WAVES’ll win the war

so what the hell are we marching for?

Rinky dinky Parley Vous.”

That was just about women in the Army and Navy. Women in the Marine Corps were called BAMs – “broad assed marines.”

Homosexuals got a “straight kick,” a discharge on whatever grounds they worked out – medical, bad conduct or whatever.

Prejudice was open and rife. Bases were segregated; blacks and whites both served, but not together. And having a white skin was no shield against prejudice. I remember one bos'n's mate calling roll came to a name he had trouble pronouncing, and asked the sailor "What nationality are you?" The sailor answered "American." "You know what I mean," snapped the bos'n's mate, "Are you Jew or Wop or what are you?"

With it all, somehow we won that war. A major share of our victory came out of a national unity that was echoed in 4 words. The first two words were "Total War." Whether you were in the armed forces, or working in a defense plant, or serving as a civilian air raid warden like my father, or a housewife knitting Bundles for Britain, it was Your War; you were part of the war effort. Slackers – and of course there were some – were scorned. Draft dodgers, and those who today would be called anti-war protesters, were considered traitors. By the standards of World War 2, some of today's political leaders could qualify for that status.

The other two words that helped us win were "Unconditional Surrender." If a kamikaze sank a U.S. ship, Roosevelt did not invite Tojo to a peace conference. My little ship was sweeping mine fields in the Aleutian Islands in 1945, and we listened to Armed Forces Radio to follow the progress of the war in Europe. As April wound down, it looked like Allied forces were in control, so when would be the day of victory there? We formed a pool on my ship. In a crew of 30 enlisted men, each of us took one day in May and bet \$1. As it happened, I drew number 8. So when Germany surrendered on May 8th of '45, I won \$30 – good money in those days, and the only money I ever won gambling!

That August, we headed east across the Gulf of Alaska toward Dutch Harbor to be outfitted for the invasion of Paramashiru, northernmost of the Kurile Islands, then under control of Japan. (Now it's Russian.) In an invasion, small wooden minesweepers like mine went in first to clear the way for the landing craft. We were told that the average life of such a ship was figured at 80 mines. Once they cut that many, by the law of averages, they would hit one – and goodbye Charley. Well, what could we do? Hey, we all had lifejackets. Paramishiru here we come. On the way we stopped at an island called Amchitka to draw "small stores." I was standing in line outside a Quonset hut, waiting to draw shoes. Suddenly every bell, every whistle, every Klaxon horn on every ship in the harbor sounded off all at once. Nobody had to tell us why. We grabbed each other and jumped for joy – the war was over! They dropped the bomb and Japan surrendered. It was the 14th of August. My shipmates and I were the happiest of all. Up to then our little YMS had cut 78 mines. Close enough?

Who made the decision to drop the A-bomb? One man gets the credit, overruling some of his top advisors. Harry Truman chose to listen to the predictions that his action could save a million American lives and 3 million in Japan. I was one of the lives he saved. Thank G-d for "Give 'em hell Harry!"

No endless negotiations then with committed, deceptive, corrupt enemies. By comparison with Iran or ISIS, the Empire of Japan was honorable. Oh yes, the Japs treated their prisoners with great cruelty, exploited people they conquered like the Korean "comfort women" and made slaves of them. It was our role in history not only to defeat Japan but to turn it into a democratic

ally. But first came victory. Then came peace. Imposed, but effective. Can anyone today imagine Iran making a similar transition? Peacefully??

So much for international relations. At least for now. Moving into economics and political structure, I watched some developments over the years that changed my thinking. Coming out of the War, I was an enthusiastic liberal. The defeated enemies were fascists, imperialists, and that real dirty word, capitalists. Some nameless source mailed copies of the Daily Worker (the Communist Party newspaper) to my Ocean Park hovel and I read it. As a friend of mine put it, "what do we have to fear from Communism?" Well, maybe the Worker didn't quite do it for me, but Socialism had a strong appeal. That was in the early 50's. Eisenhower maybe liberated the death camps, but he was not my choice for president. 8 years later, Kennedy was. And being Catholic he represented the non-WASP in me. But heroic and dramatic as he and Jackie were, their reign was cut short. LBJ didn't quite measure up.

Meanwhile, my Jewish people were struggling in other parts of the world. Russia once again oppressed them. Israel underwent several attacks until roundly trouncing local enemies in the 6-day War of 1967. And in Israel the Socialist ideal began to get modified, as new technology and new industry grew, and the proletarian/agricultural model of the pioneers weakened.

By the time the 60's played out, followed by the Nixon/Ford fiasco and Carter's total failure, Reagan came along and with some savvy advisors helped demolish the Soviet Union. But really, the Soviet Union pretty well demolished itself. Its economic policies kept its people poor and dependent. Work and more work, put your children in state nurseries to be raised by strangers, and don't even think about saving money because you have none to save. In other words, Socialism failed. Try to get out, as many Russian Jews did, and you are refused an exit permit. One day my wife and I were sent to Russia, still under Brezhnev, to find "Refuseniks" who could be rescued. By that time the Soviets had agreed to let people leave the country if they were going to reunite a family. So relatives had to be "found" for Soviet Jews to go to, in America or Israel. We brought back names and addresses of Jews who were ready to emigrate, and provided them to the Israeli consul, the one who sent us. Later we had the pleasure of seeing some of the people we helped escape, some here and some in Israel. None of them had any desire to go back to Russia, even after the fall of the Soviet Union.

What I had no direct part in, but did observe, was what was going on in China. One child per family, and no chance to grow. I saw a man carrying his only son across the street – the kid bigger than the father, but take no chances. That's all he had. With all its centuries of history and its great civilization, China let Socialism defeat it. Less of an upheaval there than in Russia, but definite changes in economic and social policies took place. Again, Socialism failed.

South American countries are experiencing similar failures today. Riots, bread lines, pro- and con- upheavals leave opportunities for Islamist agents to infiltrate, just as they are doing in Europe. In many countries, a failed socio-economic structure opens the door now to Middle Eastern terrorists. My liberal ideas didn't work. They turned out to be wrong.

And they are just as wrong in this country as they were elsewhere. The last 8 years prove it. A 19 or 20 trillion dollar debt signals a dismal future. Many people reportedly quit looking for jobs. Get on the entitlement line.

Failing leftist policies at home join dangerous world policies abroad. A candidate who proclaimed “hope and change” got elected and apparently proceeded to betray this country to its sworn enemies, in Iran where fanatic Muslims declare America their top enemy to be destroyed; in Syria and Iraq too. I watch Obama spending most of his time on taxpayer-funded world travel and domestic money-raising junkets, while his corrupt cronies sell out the future of America and its true allies. We read how he protects Islamist troublemakers from the law, even here.

America belongs to us all. Improving our country and the conditions we live with is worth doing, and it requires working together. Not killing each other. We have enough enemies overseas.

Those enemies can be clever enough to spot problems here, and use them to recruit terrorists who kill us and try to destroy our country from within. By working together we can defeat them. Gun control is not enough. It figures to have mixed results anyway.

Community leadership is what we sorely need. After 16 years of failed national administrations, we face an election with a choice between two dismal alternatives. With any luck, some of us might hope to ignore national mistakes and build some local solidarity. Success locally over the coming 4 years could conceivably lead to a valid third party and a victorious national policy. Let’s find some leaders. Let’s pursue the vision of a future when we can join all our different backgrounds to form a healthy society. Sure, we’ll disagree now and then. But with the right leadership, we can still work together.

It’s your country. Are you listening?
If you are, let’s trade some ideas.
Use Facebook.

SUMMARY

Two Zero Sixteen: What does this year’s number stand for?

Two national administrations, one from each “major” party.

Zero success rating.

Sixteen years of decline.

And now an interminable political campaign yielding a miserable choice between two extremes. One lesson we could learn from England, namely a legal limit on time and money to be spent on a political campaign. Such a law is long overdue. That’s incidental. What’s basic?

Results: Where in 1946 I rejoined civilian life in a country that was a winner, a world leader, and a haven of freedom and opportunity, today 70 years later the USA is no longer any of those things. Maybe the 21st is not our century. But I believe it still could be. Where is a movement and some leadership that can turn us around?