

# IOWA TRANSPARENCY NEWSLETTER



## How Self Indulgent Has the Media Become?

by Doug Stout

As groups like the Public Interest Institute strive to bring transparency to the political process, we expect the media to be an ally in bringing objective information to the general public. When journalists lend themselves to myopic views of history and the hand-wringing of self-indulgent perspectives, they do disservice to the cause. The November 24, 2009, edition of *Time* magazine has a lead story entitled “The ‘00s: Goodbye (at Last) to the Decade from Hell.”<sup>1</sup> They also have a photo essay entitled: “The 10 Worst Things about the Worst Decade Ever.”<sup>2</sup> Just how self-centered and totally self indulgent has the media become? What are the facts behind the headline? What do we see when we lift the rhetorical veil and peer inside the reality?

Do we really believe that we are reaching the end of the “worst decade ever?” I would wholeheartedly agree that it has not been one of the better decades. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 alone would make this one of the more somber and regrettable times. Today we are faced with official unemployment figures of over 10 percent, a number reached at only one other point since our Great Depression,

and with many other Americans underemployed and fearful about their economic future. Our great economic engine of democracy has slowed and the world we live in is changing around us. We are running up record federal deficits that threaten our future to a degree that far outpaces anything we have ever approached before in irresponsible spending. We have a Presidential Administration whose approval ranking is dropping on almost a daily basis after the disappointing policy choices the President has made since assuming the office. It has become almost impossible for our Congress to become less popular as they continue to set new record lows in every poll released. Support for both political parties has dropped precipitously, and Americans feel the country is on the wrong track. While polls have indicated that view for some time now, you only have to ask the man or woman on the street to have that view quickly confirmed.

Our nation is conducting two wars on foreign soil, with our brave men and women risking their lives on a daily basis on the roads of Iraq and in the mountains of Afghanistan. The President has just found it necessary to greatly increase the number of American

soldiers fighting for our country in Afghanistan. Our NATO allies have sent more men and women into harm’s way in that remote and unstable nation. Around the world, Russia shows signs of re-exerting more influence and the respect for democracy in the nation does not appear to be very secure. China’s influence in the world continues to grow and it is unclear in which direction the totalitarian government, with an evolving, almost capitalistic, economy will turn in the future. In some countries in our southern hemisphere, long-time democracies face leftist leaders, who once elected grow less interested in the democratic process. Peace in the Middle East continues to be ever elusive. North Korea has nuclear weapons and on almost a regular basis takes an opportunity to remind its neighbors of its capabilities. The unstable nature of its leadership has never been in doubt.

In Iran there are mixed signals. Students protest for reform in the streets, but are brutally repressed. The nation’s President is re-elected in a process filled with fraud, continues to dismiss the reality of the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews, and also continues to call for an end to the state of Israel. All

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the while, his nation grows nearer to the point where it will have the capability to launch a nuclear strike against Tel Aviv, allowing him to blackmail and intimidate his neighbors, even if the missiles are never launched. At home and abroad, Americans and other lovers of freedom, peace, and the rule of law face the daily threat of terrorism and the fear and disruption that accompany it.

So this decade has not been a beacon for the ages, but to decry it as the "worst decade ever" is to have a shortsightedness that discredits the challenges and obstacles faced and overcome by our ancestors.

Our grandparents made it through the 1930s Depression Era in the United States where unemployment went over 25 percent in the United States<sup>3</sup> and was even worse in many parts of the world, as compared to the 10 percent we currently face in our country. Those same individuals had already survived the ravages and carnage of World War I and the loss of American lives. In Europe, an entire generation practically disappeared with an estimated 16 million killed and 21 million wounded in the war.<sup>4</sup> The 1930s also saw the horrific purges of innocent civilians in the Soviet Union where Joseph Stalin murdered millions of his own citizens in a quest for total control and a communist utopia.

Those same individuals, struggling from the economic, domestic, and world turmoil of the 1930s continued right into the 1940s, where the world saw millions killed by the horrors of World War II, including the extermination of the Jewish people in the Holocaust in Germany and the infamous attack of the United States at Pearl Harbor. The decision was made

to unleash the horrible power of atomic weapons for the first time in the world's history to bring the Second World War to a more rapid conclusion and save the lives of untold numbers of Allied troops who would have been forced to assault the Japanese mainland. Starvation, war, deprivation, and brutality on a scale never before witnessed by mankind were unleashed on a scale around the globe that could scarcely be imagined. All of the mayhem was a result of the evils of fascist designs on worldwide domination and racial superiority.

If we want to focus on just the United States, perhaps we should compare the 2000-2009 decade with the 1860s, where Americans killed Americans in unprecedented numbers in the Civil War...where more American soldiers were killed in five years of fighting than in all American wars before and since combined. Where brother literally killed brother in a horrific battlefield cataclysm...while at the same time, millions of African-Americans were being held literally in chains under the institution of slavery. To add even more tragedy to a nation that had suffered horribly, just before the conclusion of the war President Lincoln was assassinated, ending all possibility of the smooth reconciliation and reconstruction process he had hoped for following the civil war.

We are struggling today, but many of our serious problems can be addressed by real courage and leadership that we have been lacking in our political process for some time. It is unfortunate that our self-indulgent, immature media, with apparently no sense of perspective or of history, has outdone itself this time. It is clear

that their view of the term “worst ever,” must only go back as far as their personal memories can take them. Have we lost all concept of the fact that this is a tough and dangerous world and it is not uncommon for our country, or the world, to go through difficult times and to have serious obstacles and challenges to face and overcome?

But we do not need to look to past generations to see times when the world was in greater danger. In October 1962, the Cuban missile crisis between the United States and the Soviet Union brought the world to the very brink of a worldwide nuclear holocaust,<sup>5</sup> which might have resulted in a nuclear winter, ending all life on our planet. Our nation, possibly on the very verge of permanent destruction, also lost its leader and much of its innocence when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated the following year. We made it through the racial unrest of the 1960s and the terrible body blows suffered to our people when we lost both Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy to the bullets of assassins. At the same time, brave Americans died on a daily basis in the rice paddies of Southeast Asia while their families grieved and the nation’s fabric was torn apart by the domestic divisions over the conduct of the war.

In the 1970s, the Vietnam War continued, and while we left the region, death and destruction did not. Following the bloody fall of Saigon to the Viet Cong, the infamous Pol Pot gained control in neighboring Cambodia and massacred as many as 2.5 million people, an estimated 21 percent of the men, women, and children in his own county in the “killing fields” while the world watched silently.

In the United States the decade also saw gas rationing and the first wage and price controls since World War II, as the Yom Kippur war in the Mideast again had the world on the brink of nuclear conflict. We went through the national disgrace and angst of the Watergate years, with a President leaving the White House in shame. The end of the decade saw creation of the “misery index” as unemployment and inflation rose together and headed toward new heights, and we learned the term “stagflation.” President Carter said the American people were in a “malaise,” and 53 American citizens were held hostage for 444 days by Islamic extremists in Tehran.<sup>6</sup>

While the 1980s and 1990s were arguably better, we must remember we fought the Persian Gulf War in 1990 and that in just 3 months in 1994 over 800,000 Rwandans were massacred in ethnic genocide<sup>7</sup> again as the world watched... and in the late 1990s we saw atrocities in Kosovo as the Balkans erupted in sectarian violence. Depending on your age, your perspective, and where you live in our country or where in the world you have watched events occur, there have been many “decades from hell.”

These are of course difficult times. Our unemployment rate has soared passed 10 percent. We face enormous economic challenges in our nation. However, it is not the first time in our nation’s history, nor is it likely to be the last time in our nation’s history. We have troops committed to the defense of our nation and our values in Afghanistan and Iraq, risking their lives on a daily basis. We also have American men and women safeguarding the peace on the Korean Peninsula and in many other

places around the world. This also is not a new development unique to the past decade.

Particularly as we reach the end of this year and the end of this decade, it may be easy to see our current problems as being unique or our current challenges as being insurmountable. It is very difficult for an individual who has been unemployed for many months to keep their perspective. It is also almost unimaginable to me how a family that has lost a loved one in the defense of our nation is able to keep their perspective in light of their personal tragedy.

However, I do know that as a nation it is incredibly important that our society keep its perspective. If we choose to believe that the last decade was somehow unique in the fact that it brought great burdens and challenges and fool ourselves into believing that we will not face just as great of challenges in the future...and that indeed our nation has not overcome even greater challenges through our still young history as a nation...then we may believe one of two things. Either that our challenges were the result of our “bad luck” and that we can “wait them out” and our luck will change; or that they are so insurmountable that we give in to despair that we can ever get our nation back on track. Both choices are ones that lead to the inevitable deterioration of our political institutions and our values and prosperity.

We must realize that we face severe challenges to our nation and to our way of life. These challenges are different than those of past generations, but they are no more severe or unmanageable. We must do as every generation of our ancestors has done and rise to

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the occasion. We must demand that our political leaders rise to the occasion, or find new leaders who will do so. We must stay united as a nation on our common vision of a better tomorrow for our own children and for the children of the world and not be distracted or led astray, believing that those who see a different path to that same common vision are our “enemy.” The world has always struggled with the tides of “good and evil.” It is a battle which is probably destined to continue unabated throughout our lives and those of our children. While it may not be a battle which can ever be fully won, that does not lessen the necessity of it being waged every day.

While you may believe that the last decade was “a decade from hell,” if so, then it was not the first one and I am sure it will not be

the last. History is full of challenges. As a society, we must be realistic as to the daunting ones we currently face and endeavor to rise to meet them. We need to see through the veil of perceptions, created by what has become a self-serving media, and see the transparent reality that this world is a tough place. Different decades and different generations bring unique challenges, but what is not unique is that we are confronted with challenges. We must resist the temptation to see them as our bane alone to bear...or to succumb to the idea that they are insurmountable. Instead, we must see them as they are...our challenges...in our time...our obligation to our ancestors and our grandchildren...to meet them head-on and to overcome them. This is our legacy and our place in history. We must meet our challenges successfully,

so as to give future generations the same chance that we had...the opportunity to overcome the challenges and the odds against them and to continue the pursuit of the American dream passed on to us by our Founders.

Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Andy Serwer, “The ‘00s: Good-bye (at Last) to the Decade from Hell,” TIME, November 24, 2009, <<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1942834,00.html?xid=rss-topstories>> (December 11, 2009).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>“The Depression in the United States,” <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1528.html> (December 11, 2009).

<sup>4</sup>“World War I Casualties,” Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_War\\_I\\_casualties](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I_casualties) (December 11, 2009).

<sup>5</sup>“Cuban Missile Crisis: Timeline,” <http://library.thinkquest.org/11046/days/timeline.html> (December 11, 2009).

<sup>6</sup>“Iran hostage crisis,” Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran\\_hostage\\_crisis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran_hostage_crisis) (December 11, 2009).

<sup>7</sup>“Rwanda: How the genocide happened,” BBC News, December 18, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/1288230.stm> (December 11, 2009).