

The Literary Club
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Dawning of the Age of Incivility

The “Dawning of the Age of Aquarius,” 1968 to 1973, was actually the beginning of a societal shift away from an unusual period of polite civil discourse to the angry divisions that we see today. This five-year period offers a glimpse into what has become national discord at every level and on every issue. Now, if that ominous and pompous introduction doesn’t cause you to “tune out and drop out,” here are some personal observations of the “Dawning of the Age of Incivility.”

An examination of what people watched on TV provides insight into their culture. It was easier to observe viewing habits in the 1968-73 period since the majority of the population were watching just three channels. The top rated TV shows at the start of this period, 1968-69, were “Laugh-In” – vaudeville brought to TV, “Gomer Pyle” – a country boy brings humor to the Marines, “Bonanza” – a wealthy landowner and his three adult sons bring common sense to the wild west, “Mayberry R.F.D.” – a small town sheriff brings law and order with wisdom and humor, and “Gunsmoke” – a caring sheriff uses deadly force to maintain law and order in the wild west. How would you characterize these cultural norms? I see gentle humor, good guys win, and the importance of law and order.

Just four years later, here are the top TV shows of 1972-73: “All in the Family” – angry, closed-minded white man insults his family and others not like him, “Sanford and Sons” – an angry, closed minded black man insults his family and others not like him, “Hawaii Five-O” – big city crime comes to paradise, and “Maude” – opinionated, mature woman espouses abortion and other feminist causes. How would you characterize this view of the culture? I see a real shift away from what was called traditional family values to what some call an eclectic view of the world and others might call a divisive view of the world – the “Dawning of the Age of Incivility.”

The cloud over all events during this period was the continued war in Vietnam – started by President Kennedy in 1960, escalated by President Johnson in 1964, and brought to long closure by President Nixon in 1973-1975. Starting this significant period, the year 1968, ranks as one of the most impactful in modern history. During the year 1968, the nation observed, with various degrees of emotion - the shooting and death of Martin Luther King, Jr followed by riots in major cities - the shooting and death of Senator Robert Kennedy – the chaotic Democratic National Convention with accompanying riots – and the election of President Richard Nixon. That election was a divisive, three-way race with Republican Nixon promising change, Democrat Hubert Humphrey supporting Johnson policies, and Independent George Wallace campaigning for racial segregation. Wallace actually won five states.

In the world during 1968, France was virtually shut down by general labor and student strikes, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, a student-led protest in Mexico City was put down by military with hundreds killed or wounded, and 22 African nations boycotted the Olympics in South Africa where three Americans raised their fists in a Black Power salute during the U.S.

National Anthem. To bring a note of optimism and wonder to the end of the year, Apollo 8 circled the moon and treated the world with a view of our planet never before seen by humans. If there ever is an unusually eventful year for a nation, I would submit 1968 as one of those years where nothing will ever be the same again.

My personal observations of this period were shaped by living and working in Brussels in 1968-69 followed by Plant Manager assignments back in the U.S. through 1973 – all courtesy of our local household goods company. If I dare summarize a European view of these 1968 events, the obvious continued functioning of the U.S. in the midst of lurid reporting of demonstrations, riots, and anger was hard for them to grasp. The Europeans worried about the possible loss of the U.S. military safety net, but marveled that the democracy was surviving these blows.

Returning to the U.S. in 1969, I took responsibility as Plant Manager of one of the company's three manufacturing plants on Staten Island, and later moved to become Chicago Plant manager. Coloring my observations during this exciting time as a Plant Manager in two major cities, was a view that folks who worked in our plants represented a microcosm of the voting population of the country.

During the "Dawning of the Age of Incivility," the prevailing mood of the people in the plants and, I submit, in the nation was one of consternation. There was general antipathy to the college student uprisings. These privileged children, who had advantages working people hoped for their children, were destroying the offices of college Presidents and defecating in hallways, with few indications that there were consequences to their actions. The assumed motivation of these students was ascribed to their cowardice in refusing to do the noble thing and be available for the Military Draft as they or their relatives did in WWII, as well as being spoiled by their parents. However, the newly described "counter-culture" was nourished by music groups like The Doors. The opening lines of their album and song, "Strange Days" actually captures a view of the nation in 1968-1973:

"Strange days have found us
Strange days have tracked us down
They're going to destroy
Our casual toys"

The operating of a major manufacturing facility is never dull – particularly in a major metropolitan area. The unease in the country during 1968 started to spill over and added to workplace concerns. The Staten Island P&G facility, called Port Ivory, was much like Ivorydale used to be with three plants on a huge site. The rioters that took their issues to the streets across the nation were mimicked by the union. In 1969, Port Ivory experienced two "wildcat" strikes of one day each with considerable rancor in labor relations. As the three Plant Managers and resident Division Manager wrestled with best way to manage this less and less productive operation, all of us received death threats and monitored our cars for bombs – not normal for Plant Management in the past. We did develop an effective strategy that recognized that the battle may be with the union leaders, but the war was for the hearts and minds of our employees. That could be a subject for another paper or dialog over a beer later.

At Chicago, the plant had been affected by the riots following the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., and still had residual neighborhood difficulties. I collected a display of burned out “Molotov Cocktails” tossed into the plant, and bullets dug out of office walls. We had the first bomb threats at a P&G manufacturing plant and, unlike Port Ivory where my life was threatened, calls came that threatened my children’s lives – by name. Hard not to observe that times had changed.

A nearly forgotten societal change was happening at the time of all the other unrest. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, EEOC, had been created earlier, but not given litigation authority until 1972. Up until the mid-1960’s, jobs in the plants were labeled and staffed male or female, with female jobs oriented toward lower paying, repetitive packing operations or other “light duty” jobs. When the company removed those designations, very few women broke the pattern by bidding on jobs previously labeled as male. Also, the African American males in the plant held mostly clean-up or other low-paying, manual jobs, and bid on key jobs at their physical peril.

When the authority of the EEOC to litigate universities, employers, and unions became law in 1972, I met with the Chicago union President and made sure he understood that I was going to increase company efforts to break these barriers. There would be no grounds for the EEOC or anyone to sue the company – for gender or race. The union had better get off its backend and remove the informal barriers that were holding back the women and African Americans of the plant. If not, the union, and not the company, was going to deal with legal challenges from the EEOC. The union President quickly grasped his position, and the plant started to have women and African Americans move up the wage scale – albeit slowly. The first woman in the Chicago Plant to bid on a previously male position took a fork lift job supplying packing materials. The men in the department filed a formal complaint that she made the job unsafe. The union President showed great leadership in telling the men that the woman may be a threat to them in capability and masculinity, but the only safety issues were theirs. That woman was an African American representing a change beyond what appears in written material.

Of all the turmoil and cultural shift of the “Dawning of the Age of Incivility,” the impact of the EEOC may well be the most far-reaching and impactful of any. There are still issues being worked today with legitimate concerns about a “Glass Ceiling” limiting women, African Americans, and other minorities. These issues are often exaggerated by the lack of civility in public discourse, but it is hard to ignore the real progress in gender and racial balance. Change started fifty years ago is becoming more of a national norm – not perfect but a truly different nation today.

As an optimist about the American system, I try to temper my distaste for incivility, and view the current cultural noise as a part of the change process of an improving society. This kind of change does take decades, and not all of us will be around to experience that new society. However, it is my hope that the “Age of Aquarius” and the “Age of Incivility” will lead ultimately to an “Age of Understanding.”