

KeyOpinion

Happy New Year

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It was a war in which everyone in the country was affected or involved, either directly in the armed forces, or working in essential factories, or living with food and gas rationing and supporting the national effort with heavy taxes.

In short, it was not a conflict in which only a few sacrificed, while the rest of us watched a sanitized version on television and the financial costs were deferred for our grandchildren to shoulder.

Slowly, but surely, people are coming to realize that there has been a serious failure of leadership in this country, on both a state and national level, infecting both major political parties.

Before coming to power, the fortunes of many of our politicians were derived from the oil industry and from colossal conglomerates such as Halliburton and Bechtel, which helps to explain why Tallahassee and Washington both now push for oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico and why billion-dollar contracts for Iraqi reconstruction are awarded to favored contractors without bidding.

These leaders claim that high gas prices are the result of a shortage of oil, and that new exploration off Florida's shores and in Alaska will alleviate the situation, when the truth is that the problem is caused not by a shortage of crude oil, but by a lack of refineries to refine the crude oil available.

The shortage of refineries, in turn, is caused by damage to existing facilities by recent hurricanes, and the fact that new refineries are not being built to keep up with the demand. Despoiling the Gulf and Alaskan tundra is not going to solve any problems.

As to the war itself, it is now clear that flawed intelligence played a large part in decisions made by leaders without military experience, acting against the advice of professionally trained experts as to the numbers of men and equipment necessary to not only wage war, but

maintain the peace thereafter.

There is no dispute that Saddam Hussein was a bad-ass murderous dictator, who had grown too big for his britches after having originally been brought to power with the connivance of our own government. But he should have been deposed through covert action. His removal was not worth the drop of blood of one American man or woman.

Furthermore, there were no weapons of mass destruction. If there had been and there had truly been a threat in the mid-east, the Israelis would have taken them out, as they did once before in Iran and as they may do in the future if that theocracy gets too far out of line.

However, having succeeded in ousting the dictator, President Bush should have heeded his own observation of "Mission accomplished," and pulled the troops out. Keeping them there turned them into an army of occupation, with neither plans nor capacity to govern the country. And armies of occupation, by definition, are hated everywhere.

Hawks will argue that pulling out the troops would have resulted in a civil war, as various secular and religious factions jostled for supremacy, and they are right. Unfortunately, however, there will ultimately be a civil war in that benighted country, whenever we do decide to pull out.

What the United States is doing now is training an Iraqi army to take over the battle. We have done that once before. It was called "Vietnamization," and as soon as the South Vietnamese were deemed capable of taking over,

we proceeded to withdraw our forces, whereupon the insurgents proceeded to blast our newly trained allies out of existence.

Like their predecessors in Vietnam, military brass keep assuring the American public that the situation is under control and that insurgents are being decimated in great numbers. As in Vietnam, however, their ranks are magically increasing, with the added problem that they seem tragically ready to commit suicide in their efforts to drive our troops out of their country.

We need to learn from history. The advice once given to President Nixon to "declare victory and get the hell out of there" was good advice.

Once we leave, the situation will ultimately sort itself out, without needless shedding of additional American blood. The future may even bring good relations with the new rulers of that country, as it has with prior enemies (Vietnam, Germany, Japan, Italy, et al.)

These observations are not meant to suggest that our leaders are greedy or corrupt, although lately there is certainly a fair degree of inordinate self-serving getting the attention of grand juries.

The main problem is ineptitude. We get the kind of government we deserve, and hopefully, with enough voters making resolutions in the voting booths, the new year will bring a wholesale turnover in the halls of power.

Happy New Year, everyone.

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne,
We'll take a cup of kindness yet
For auld lang syne.*

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The Truth About Grandchildren

Tom Burgum
Contributing Columnist

There is a lot of nonsense about the joys of being a grandparent. We have all heard the stories of how smart, how cute and how entertaining are these most-recent additions to the family. Now, all of that may be true but that has not been my experience. I have found the real advantage in having them around for short periods — the reason none of us like to acknowledge — is that when the grandchildren approach the teen years they reaffirm that one of the best days of our lives was when their parents moved out of the home place and went out into the world.

Most people, if they are honest with themselves, will have to admit that their own children had the ability to make them feel even older than they were and the grandchildren have attitudes that can make you feel downright ancient. I don't need that right now as I am at an age where insisting on a 10 year warranty on a car is an expression of unwarranted optimism.

Cole is our youngest grandson. He has a bad habit of not wanting to hear about anything that happened over 15 minutes ago. His favorite question is, "Why are we talking about this, it was so long ago?" His embargo on information includes almost everything that happened before 2003. It is only my inherent good nature and threats from his grandmother that have prevented me from putting my aging hands around his throat and screaming, "Recorded history did not start the day you were born. Things happened before you were born. There was the Reformation, the American Civil War, World War II and a President named Nixon. All these things are important."

I have also been rudely reminded that the grandsons, like my own children, do not consider me to be "cool." When I take them to the movies, they now want to go in alone, sit alone and then meet in the parking lot. That isn't the way it used to be. Tony Kornheiser related a similar situation some years ago in the Washington Post. He recounted how his daughter, when she was nine, considered him a hero. But he noticed that at 11 she began to wonder if he might not be a dork. At 12, she thought he was a dork, and at 14 she considered him eligible to be Sheriff of Dorkingham.



Tom Burgum with his grandsons, Cole (left) and Joseph Burgum

Well, it now seems as I am eligible to be Sheriff of Dorkingham. In addition to the movie exclusion, I have been banned from the annual shopping trip on the day after Christmas. Their grandmother is quite good about this trip as she is every bit as permissive and accommodating as any grandmother anywhere. Last year I think her acquiescence to every need, real and imagined, is believed to have boosted the S&P 500 by two points. My offer to go along this year was met with silence and facial expressions that ranged from bemusement to apprehension. It was clear that my somewhat rumpled presence was not needed. I can't lay the whole blame on the grandsons for this one. My tennis partner once said, "You look like an unmade bed."

So I admit I am not the best candidate for the position of fashion guide on a shopping trip, but I think family should cut one a little slack.

A Christmas visit, whatever else it might be, is certainly a time when the grandchildren can tell the grandparents what is going on in their lives, how they are doing in school and at home, whether they have a girlfriend, or whatever. Get real. You aren't going to find out enough to justify a five-minute phone call. This year I tried something recommended on TV: get them in a car so you can talk to them without any distractions. It doesn't work. A sample conversation goes like this:

How is school going this year?

OK.

Have you done better in math?

Silence.

How are your grades?

OK.

I understand you have a girlfriend.

Silence.

What is your favorite subject?

Do we have to keep talking about this stuff?

Talking? Talking? Who's talking? This wasn't a conversation, this was a monologue with a question mark at the end. I went through this with my kids and now I am beating my head against the wall with the grandsons. But, I now understand those who want to torture captured terrorists to get information. It is not meanness but overwhelming frustration that drives people to want to hurt people who will not answer questions.

My favorite response from the boys comes when, heaven forbid, sex somehow is entered into the conversation. No matter what is said, no matter the subject, Joe's response is, "Oh, for Pete's sake, I knew about that in the sixth grade." Aside from the conclusion that the kid had one great sixth grade, you know what he is really thinking. He is thinking, "How can they know anything about sex? They are old people." Why does every kid or young person believe that their generation discovered sex? Does it not occur to them that someone before them had to know about it or they wouldn't be here saying stupid things and thinking stupid thoughts?

Soon it will be time for the dynamic-duo to leave. I know how that will go. I will recall their arrival a couple days before Christmas. It could have been a scene from a Frank Capra movie. They rushed in with parcels and boxes and stuff. There was helloing and hugs and shouts of Merry Christmas; it was nice and we were all truly glad to see each other. Now they are preparing to leave. There won't be any more aggravating silences when I ask a question, I won't have to try to explain the importance of any event prior to 2003, and they will take the insufferable arrogance of the young down the walk with them. And damn, I will miss them.