Americans' History

Will the deluge come after us?

By Michael J. Robinson

Before his brief stint as a TV judge for the new "People's Court," Ed Koch was once a successful politician: a five-term member of the House of Representatives and, then, a three-term mayor of the City of New York.

While in office, Koch would walk the streets of Manhattan and ask his constituents, at random, what now can be considered the "Koch question." He'd inquire of any man-on-the-street, "Hey, fella, how am I doin'?"

It was the kind of question that gets to the heart of political success or political failure. And anybody can ask any constituency, regardless of size or scope, that same question and get an important answer about the way things are going, or have been going—not just for a single politician but for something as big and as broad as the nation at large.

In essence, that's what the Pew Research Center did with the "Koch question." They extended the scope and converted the question to a long-term—historical—one. Pew, in its comprehensive, *retrospective*, millennium survey asked the American public how it thinks *we* have been doin'. And not just at this juncture, but how we've been doin' for, say, the last fifty to a hundred years.

Koch's motives were strictly political. Pew's objectives were wholly academic—history as Americans see it. Pew, in fact, was trying to put together a poll-based course in "Americans' History." But whether the motive be political or academic, the "Koch question" gets to one of the most seminal matters in politics: what the citizenry thinks about winning or losing, about triumph or defeat; and not just for the citizens themselves, but for the entire fifty United States.

In survey research, the answers to such questions are typically called "findings," but in the world of entertainment, findings like those yielded by the "Koch question" would be called "reviews." And when asked general questions as to how we have done during this, the entire American Century, the public gives a "two thumbs up" response. When asked a slew of questions as to how we have done, specifically, during the last 50 years, the public again gives a "thumbs up."

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But we give ourselves *and* the nation—when considered together—something akin only to a "one-thumber." We won't go all the way and give self-and-society, in combination, that much-coveted double thumbs.

Whence comes this ambiguity about our history? In a way, the answer lies in Bill Clinton's now infamous hedge about what has *ever* transpired in the past: that it all depends on your *definition*. In our case this "dependency" has nothing to do with the definition of the word "is." No, in our case, the definition problem has only to do with the pronoun "we."

The first question in the millennium survey went right to the *personal*—that is, the personal level of "we." Every respondent was asked the following: "Compared to members of your family in the 1950s, would you say your life today is generally better, worse, or about the same?"

As they say in Hollywood, the reviews here are "boffo." Nearly two-thirds of us (63%) think that we, as individuals, lead better lives than our families led at mid-century. Even more impressive is the fact that fewer than one in eight adults believes he or she is living a life that is "worse" than his or her family experienced five decades ago. Working out the arithmetic, more than *five times* as many individuals think they're doing better today than their own folks were doing back then.

In fact, if all our questions about America's last fifty years had focused on the personal level, then the conclusion for this "Progress Report" would be straight forward and very upbeat: "We never had it so good." Or, more accurately, *"I* never had it so good."

Regardless of age—"Boomers," "X-ers," "Dot Comers," whatever—the results are the same. In fact, no matter the gender, the race, the religion, or the educational level of the respondent, the answer varies hardly at all: Better, better, better. Even among those whose family income is less than $20,000 per year, more than twice as many say they, personally, are doing better now than the family did then than say they're doing worse. This is a "two-thumbs up" review, if ever there was one.

With as positive a response as this, one might be compelled to ask why Americans are so certain in their belief that they've done better than their parents or grandparents. One obvious explanation is "reality." Above all, economic reality—the

bread-and-butter criterion upon which so much opinion about self-in-society is based.

In 1950, the average "guy" worked in manufacturing. And for his pains the average working man earned about $1.40 an hour. Today the average working man is, as likely as not, the average working woman. And neither works in manufacturing. But for those who do, the average hourly wage is just under thirteen dollars—more than *nine times* greater than the average wage just fifty years ago.

The same pattern exists for "the family." Median family income, even factoring out inflation, is two and a half times what it was during the final years of the Truman administration. So, part of the reason for this "two-thumbs-up" review is objective fact about disposable income.

There are other, more subjective, explanations for this boffo review. For example, whenever people grade *themselves,* their grades generally turn out to be "better than expected." And when a stranger calls respondents over the phone and asks how successful they've been in life, most don't rush to say, "Well, actually I'm a failure."

But, whatever the reasons for this particular set of findings, the implications are the same: American citizens view themselves as a kind of real-world, 20th century Horatio Alger. Like Alger, we see ourselves as having lived lives of self-improvement. Like Alger, we see ourselves as having pulled ourselves up by our very own bootstraps. And, like Alger, we can, when compared with mom and dad, afford a much higher quality of boot.

But these poll-based reminiscences about doing better appear even more remarkable when one looks beyond the "individuals" and considers the next level of "we": the multitude of *groups* that make up the American melting pot.

Pew asked their respondents to look at 15 types of people and review their progress these last 50 years. Consider these various types of people to be the standard demographic groupings any sociologist would want to include in building a profile of Americans: senior citizens, gays, lesbians, Hispanics, women, disabled people, union members, blacks—even that most peculiar "minority," the American white male.

In the public's mind, just how well have any, and all, of these groups done since the 1950s? Better or worse? Generally speaking, we see lots of group progress. For 10 of the 15 groups, a *majority* says that each particular group has done better during the last half century (see Figure 1).

In reading the public's views of the last fifty years, one would certainly want to know, which group has done the best? The answer: women. Eighty-three percent of us say women are better off today. That's nine times as many as those who think the distaff gender is worse off.

Also breaking the 80% barrier are the disabled and African Americans. In fact, among all the groups, blacks could well be considered the "winners" here. More than thirteen times as many people consider African Americans to be better off now than back in the 1950s.

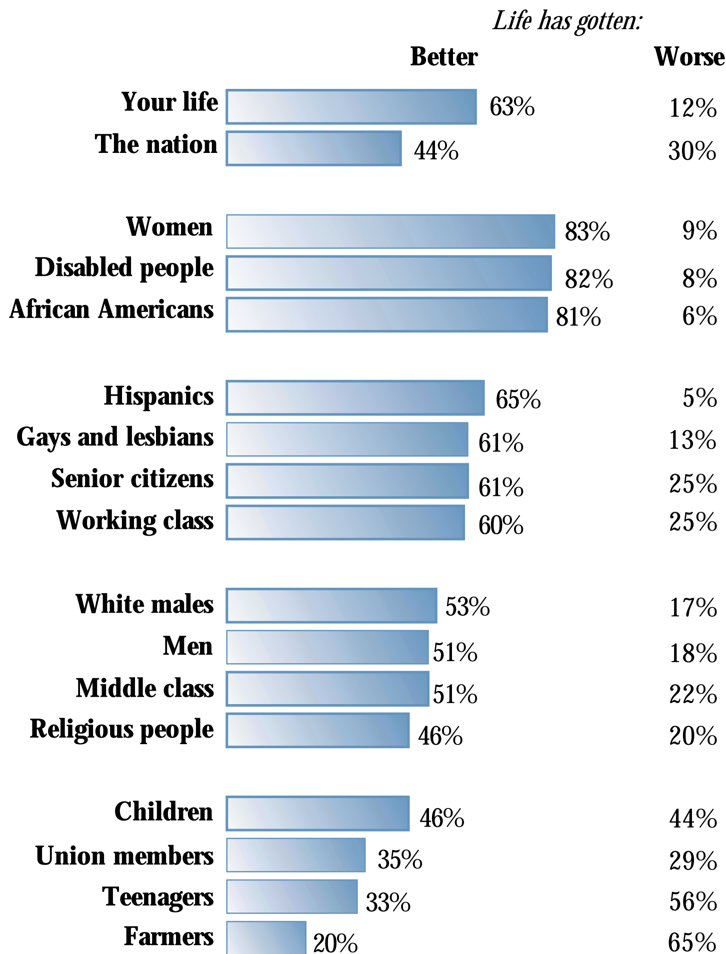
Of course, whites regard the last 50 years of "black history" more affirmatively than do blacks themselves. Yet, significantly, African Americans—63%—say things are going better for them as a group at the end of the century than they were at the midway point. That's the exact same percentage of the entire sample that believes they personally have done better. Only 14% of African Americans think things are worse for them now, at century's end.

And in remembering the way we were, at least six Americans in ten think that Hispanics, gays, lesbians, senior citizens, and the working class are all, by comparison, doing better now. In

Figure 1

Social Progress, Even Some Social Justice

Questions: Compared to members of your family in the 1950s, would you say your life today is generally better, worse, or about the same; ...Since the 1950s, would you say life in the US has gotten better, gotten worse or stayed about the same; ...Please tell me whether life has gotten better or worse ...for this group of Americans over the past 50 years?



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Pew Research Center, April 6-May 6, 1999.

essence, the major social movements of the last fifty years—the civil rights movement, the gay rights movement, and the women's movement—are considered to have succeeded, and are considered as such by healthy majorities. Americans review their own history here, and they see social progress, even some social justice, for the outsiders.

And what about the men? White men? The insiders? The "men's movement" may be something of a joke in some circles. But men, as a group—or as a social movement—are perceived as having done well for themselves in postwar America. White men most of all. Fifty-three percent of the public think "white males" are doing better now than in the not-so-distant past.

And what do men, themselves, think? *If* white males are really angry about anything—which was the conventional wisdom throughout the 1990s—they are not angry with their overall lot in life. Even *white males* feel that they have made progress as a group over time—51% say they've done "better" since the 1950s, and just 25% say "worse," a ratio of two to one positive.

So, we might well ask ourselves, is there *any* bad news here about groups, movements and minorities? Of course there is. Four groups did badly in the public's assessment of social change: union members and farmers, *and* teenagers and kids.

That union members and farmers—farmers above all—are perceived as having done poorly, or even miserably, in the last fifty years makes real sense. Concerning the "truth" about farmers, it's probably enough to note that in 1950 there were well over five million farms in the US. As of today, that figure is just above 2 million. Concerning the "truth" about the labor movement, it's about the same as for farmers: in 1950, just under a third of the labor force was unionized. Today union membership accounts for barely a seventh of that force.

But setting aside those two groups, we're left with the last two—two groups that hang together as a "package." We're left with two groups whose current image suggests that many Americans worry we might be coming up on the end of progress. It is children and, above all, teenagers who make up that package—a class of persons who are considered to be moving on *down*. In a word, we're talking about the nation's *youth*. And we're talking darkly.

The fact is indisputable: Among the various groups, young Americans are considered losers in the game of recent American history. As many Americans think children have done worse since the 1950s as think they've done better. A healthy majority (56%) believes teenagers have done worse.

But *why* do Americans see it that way?

There are three possible explanations. First, this could be "objective" truth—that perception is "reality." Second, this could be yet another media-based phenomenon. Last, it could be that what Pew has uncovered is *inherency*: the notion that adults always have—and always will—believe youth is going to hell in a handbasket.

Pew's survey can't address the first interpretation: whether

it is objectively true that children are no better off now than 50 years ago, or that teenagers are decidedly worse off. But a case can be made, either way, if one considers behavioral indicators.

If one uses profanity as a measure of things getting worse, then among teenagers—even little kids—things have definitely been going downhill. Teenagers of the '90s will use words in "mixed company" that teenagers of the '50s would have had difficulty uttering in "unmixed" company. The same goes for today's body piercing, tattoos, and purple hair, almost none of which existed among middle class kids when Pat Boone was considered a rock-and-roller.

But if one chooses crime as an indicator, then the case for "reality" is more ambiguous. If 1950 is the benchmark, then certainly there is an open-and-shut case for arguing increased juvenile crime and delinquency. It is also true, though, that public perceptions have yet to catch up with improvements that have occurred over the last ten years. Murder—disproportionately a late-teenage behavior "pattern"—is down about 30% since 1990. And arrests of adolescents are down about a tenth since this decade began.

Then there's the issue of education, which in the year 2000 is the public's greatest policy-related concern. The reality is that back in 1950 more than 40% of America's eighteen-year-olds had not managed even to graduate from high school—had "dropped out." In the late '90s, the high school dropout rate was just under *half* of what it was back then. A *real* "plus" on a *real* "issue"—but, again, a qualified plus, since a high school diploma doesn't go nearly as far as it used to.

The biggest issue of all is life-or-death. And during the last five decades the suicide rate for adolescents and young adults has tripled. So, reality does cut both ways, and deeply.

The second possibility is media-based: that media biases and proclivities have wrought these perceptions of our history. Pew's data offer indirect evidence to support this notion, evidence which implies that media practices "produce" images that portray a younger generation gone bad. Consider "Littleton."

As it happens, this poll was in mid-course when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold murdered thirteen of their schoolmates at Columbine High. About 60% of the interviews were conducted before the shootings occurred, the remainder just afterward.

Littleton became an enormous "mediality," a mediality being nothing more than a news story that takes on a life of its own, going way beyond objective truth as the press feeds frenziedly on the actual facts of the case.

School shootings have actually declined during the last decade, but that was not the image that came across in the press, or in the softer media, as evil surfaced in Colorado. In fact, data collected about network evening news coverage of the mass killings suggest that nobody's outdoing ABC, CBS and NBC in covering a mediality such as a Littleton. According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs, in the week following the actual shootings, the "Big Three" devoted 151 stories to Littleton on evening news. That works out to seven stories per broadcast!

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The case of Littleton demonstrates the power of a huge mediality—it shows us how media images can cause people to rewrite their own history, whether or not it's valid in the rewrite. Before Littleton, 52% of the public said that "life for teenagers since the '50s" has grown "worse." After Littleton, the figure jumped dramatically to 61%. Reality *and* mediality played a role in that conversion.

This "Littleton Effect" raises all sorts of issues, methodological and substantive. But the "Littleton Effect" ought not to be considered *sui generis*. Sensationalism in the mass media, especially with respect to violent, criminal behavior, helps explain some of the perception we hold about all our kids, particularly teenagers.

Despite the aforementioned decline in the murder rate since 1990, network news coverage of homicide has increased nearly five-fold. We do see youth and youth violence very harshly in the media, and increasingly so, almost in spite of the hard facts. And we also see Jerry Springer, and his *youthful* audience, and his *youthful* guests. And we—their elders—recoil at all three.

Finally, as explanation, there's *inherency*—just probably an eternal verity, one in which adults ineluctably believe that their kids act badly—certainly worse than their parents behaved. Every generation's children are almost always seen as better off financially, but worse off behaviorally than the one before.

There's got to be some truth to this notion, and Pew provides

us some luscious irony to support it. Even adults who were teenagers in the late '60s believe teenagers today are "worse off" than *they* were, back in the days of the wild-eyed American Cultural Revolution and the war in Vietnam. "Boomers," in fact, are no less likely to bemoan the condition of today's kids than any other age group—despite the egregious behavior patterns associated with *their* youth.

In the end, public perceptions of what's happened to America's children and teenagers may be mainly real, or they may be mainly chimerical. Either way, those perceptions are consequential.

Pew's survey comes with a riddle, of sorts. Returning to that concept of the definition of "we," one discovers a real tension in the major findings, perhaps even a paradox. When evaluating themselves, a rock-solid majority of people says that life for themselves and for their families has improved since the 1950s. When evaluating the *nation*, not even half say that "life in the United States" is better now than back then. And that figure dropped down to 38% right after Littleton.

Pew answers its own riddle, in essence, by focusing on doubts and fears concerning the overall "moral climate" in America—what William Bennett called "the death of outrage." Among the 30% who felt that the state of the nation has deteriorated since mid-century, an incredible 69% mentioned something related to "moral breakdown" as the way in which this deterioration has manifested itself. Individuals get somewhat richer. Minorities achieve more social justice. But the *nation* stands still. Spiritually we've gone to seed, though not yet to hell.

Still, one might do better explaining this paradox by turning things around just a bit and putting more of the focus on youth. If youth are regarded as the most significant group of losers in America's recent history, and if youth are regarded as losers for reasons that have to do with spirit and values—not financial well-being—then perhaps it is our doubts and fears about our youth that best solve the riddle. Stated in slightly different terms: if enhanced prosperity for people, and greater social justice for minorities, has been achieved—but achieved without benefiting our kids—then we are in trouble. In a circumstance like this, we just can't justify giving two thumbs up to the country as a whole.

In fact, there might be more here than simply solving an attitudinal Rubik's Cube. Americans may not see youth only as an *indicator* of the "bad news" about the society. They may actually believe that youth has become a significant *cause* of our national—spiritual—stagnation and decline.

This idea of youth as cause *and* effect of America's arrested development helps explain our attitudes both toward youth *and* toward the nation. So we might be solving more than a riddle here, and actually coming close to a model—or even theory—of public opinion concerning the last fifty years.

Finally there's this notion: Americans can't give "two thumbs up" to the society because they fear that the pluses have, in part, caused the minuses. They worry that perhaps (a) our increasing wealth and (b) our expanding social justice for minorities have actually come at the expense of our own kids. Liberals have always believed "a"; conservatives have always believed "b." This time, both sides could be right. If so, both the nation and the public will have to remain in conflict with their own opinions, and with their own practices and social policies.

Louis XV, having brought France to ruin in the Seven Years War, was asked whether this would be the end of him and the Bourbon dynasty. Not to worry, according to Louis. Things had been fine until now, and things were going to be okay. And then Louis uttered the words which render him a plausible future answer for Regis Philbin's game show, those words that have saddled him forever with his historical identity: "After us, the deluge." Or, if you'll pardon my French, "*Apres nous, le deluge.*"

I think there's a little bit of Louis in today's public opinion. In *fin de siècle* America, I sense that people worry there might be a deluge on the way, or, at the very least, an extended "rain delay." Very few of us spy Armageddon on the road before us. But there is, out there in the public psyche, evidence of "diluvian angst."

For now, looking back through their rearview mirror on history, the American people see two different reflections. In the first image they see individuals who have achieved and minorities who have been given a shot at social justice. But very close-by is a second image, less historical perhaps, but nearly as significant. It's the kids, sitting in the back seat of the nation's minivans and SUV's. And the mirror seems to project an image in which the kids in the back seat have not been behaving very well. And some of them seem not to have been particularly well-raised from the get-go.

So, in the end, Americans are asking themselves "are we there yet?" And for now, we have decided that on the road trip through our own history, we may still be only half the way home.