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DEAR FRIEND.....

Why Does Half Of Americans Want To Take The Country Back To The 1950s

Inline image 1

Would you rather live in the America of 1950 or the America of 2016? Has the United States changed for the better over the last 62 years? Many fondly remember the 1950s and the 1960s as the "*golden age*" of America. We emerged from World War II as the wealthiest and most powerful nation on the planet. During that time period, just about anyone that wanted to get a job could find a job and the U.S. middle class expanded rapidly. Back in 1950, America was still considered to be a "*land of opportunity*" and the economy was growing like crazy. There was less crime, there was less divorce, the American people had much less debt and the world seemed a whole lot less crazy. Most of the rest of the world deeply admired us and wanted to be more like us.

Of course there were a lot of things that were not great about America back in 1950, and there are many things that many of us dearly love that we would have to give up in order to go back and live during that time. For example, there was no Internet back in 1950. Instead of being able to go online and read the articles that you want to read, your news would have been almost entirely controlled by the big media companies of the day. So there are definitely some advantages that we have today that they did not have back in 1950. But not all of the changes have been for the better. America is in a constant state of change, and many are deeply concerned about where all of these changes are taking us.

There has never been any society in society in the history of the world that has been perfect. America was flawed in 1950 just as America is flawed today. And yes in 1950, the United States was #1 in GDP per capita while today we are #13 in GDP per capita. Older people may remember 3 cents stamps, or when the median age at first marriage was about 22 for men and about 20 for women, Americans regularly left their cars and the front doors of their homes unlocked, and when Americans dressed up in suits and dresses before getting on an airplane in the 1950s. There was a sense of civility at the time, provided that you weren't working in a coal mine in Appalachia, or in the cotton fields in the Deep South or were picking grapes in California. And if you were Black, Jewish, Hispanic or gay, more often than not, you were treated as a second class citizen in many parts of the country.

People forget The Cold War, when there were people in the military (on both sides) who believed that nuclear wars were winnable. Americans complain about taxes today, but for those of you who nostalgic about the 1950s, should remember that in 1950 corporate taxes accounted for about 30 percent of all federal revenue, whereas today corporate taxes will account for less than 7 percent of all federal revenue, and the top tax rate for individuals was 91%. I am sure that if the tax rate was the same that it was in the 1960s the country would have a balanced budget but few people want this. I remember the Jim Crowe laws, segregation and the lynching of 14 year-old Emmitt Till, because someone thought that he whistled at a white woman in Mississippi.

The booming prosperity of the 1950s helped to create a widespread sense of stability, contentment and consensus in the United States. However, that consensus was a fragile one, and it splintered for good during the tumultuous 1960s. But much of this was because two world wars had decimated the economies of Europe and Asia, giving the US companies' free reign to dominate markets around the world. But European and Asian countries rebuilt their industries in the 1950s and 60s to challenge this dominance, and today more and more Americans are buying cars from Germany, clothes from Italy that are made in India and Bangladesh, while all of our iPhones are made (in part if not all) in China. That is not stealing American jobs, since these are the choices of American consumers.

The prosperity of the Eisenhower years did not touch all Americans, however. Even as the nation prospered and the middle class did well, something like 25% of citizens lived in poverty (then defined as an annual income under $3,000 for a family of four). Much of this poverty was said to be "*invisible*;" it affected blacks in urban neighborhoods and whites in depressed rural areas like the Appalachian Mountains. Middle-class folks enjoying their new swimming pools in the suburbs could go through their lives without ever seeing the misery in other sectors of American society. Poverty amid plenty was another paradox of the Fifties, but most were able to ignore it.

There has been a decivilization globally and especially here in America – After a three-decade free fall that spanned the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, Americans multiplied their homicide rate by more than two and a half, from a low of 4.0 in 1957 to a high of 10.2 in 1980. The upsurge included every other category of major crime as well, including rape, assault, robbery, and theft, and lasted (with ups and downs) for three decades. The cities got particularly dangerous, especially New York, which became a symbol of the new criminality. Though the surge in violence affected all the races and both genders, it was most dramatic among black men, whose annual homicide rate had shot up by the mid-1980s to 72 per 100,000.

The flood of violence from the 1960s through the 1980s reshaped American culture, the political scene, and everyday life. Mugger jokes became a staple of comedians, with mentions of Central Park getting an instant laugh as a well-known death trap. New Yorkers imprisoned themselves in their apartments with batteries of latches and deadbolts, including the popular "*police lock,*" a steel bar with one end anchored in the floor and the other propped up against the door.

The rebounding of violence in the 1960s defied every expectation. The decade was a time of unprecedented economic growth, nearly full employment, levels of economic equality for which people today are nostalgic, historic racial progress, and the blossoming of government social programs, not to mention medical advances that made victims more likely to survive being shot or knifed. Social theorists in 1962 would have happily bet that these fortunate conditions would lead to a continuing era of low crime. And they would have lost their shirts.

The 1960s were supposed to be the era of peace and love, and so they were in some respects. But the glorification of dissoluteness shaded into an indulgence of violence and then into violence itself. At the end of every concert, The Who famously smashed their instruments to smithereens, which could be dismissed as harmless theater were it not for the fact that drummer Keith Moon also destroyed dozens of hotel rooms; and accidentally killed his bodyguard by running over him with his car before dying himself in 1978 of the customary drug overdose.

When rock music burst onto the scene in the 1950s, politicians and clergymen vilified it for corrupting morals and encouraging lawlessness. Do we now have to – gulp – admit they were right? Can we connect the values of 1960s popular culture to the actual rise in violent crimes that accompanied them? Not directly, of course. Correlation is not causation, and a third factor, the push back against the values of the Civilizing Process, presumably caused both the changes in popular culture and the increase in violent behavior. Also, the overwhelming majority of baby boomers committed no violence whatsoever. Still, attitudes and popular culture surely reinforce each other, and at the margins, where susceptible individuals and subcultures can be buffeted one way or another, there are plausible causal arrows from the decivilizing mindset to the facilitation of actual violence.

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