

Goodbye Gordon Gekko

The Crash of 2008, which is now wiping out trillions of dollars of our people's wealth, is, like the Crash of 1929, likely to mark the end of one era and the onset of another.

The new era will see a more sober and much diminished America. The "Omnipower" and "Indispensable Nation" we heard about in all the hubris and bragadocio following our Cold War victory is history.

Seizing on the crisis, the Left says we are witnessing the failure of market economics, a failure of conservatism.

This is nonsense. What we are witnessing is the collapse of Gordon Gekko "greed is good" capitalism. What we are witnessing is what happens to a prodigal nation that ignores history and abandons the philosophy and principles that made it great.

A true conservative cherishes prudence and believes in fiscal responsibility, balanced budgets, and a self-reliant republic. He believes in saving for retirement and a rainy day, in deferred gratification, in not buying on credit what you cannot afford.

Is that really what got Wall Street and us into this mess—that we followed too religiously the gospel of Robert Taft and Russell Kirk?

"Government must save us!" cries the Left, as ever. Yet who got us into this mess if not the government—the Fed with its easy money, Bush with his profligate spending, and Congress and the SEC by liberating Wall Street and failing to step in and stop the drunken orgy?

For years, we Americans have spent more than we earned. We save nothing. Credit card debt, consumer debt, auto debt, mortgage debt, corporate debt—all are at record levels. And with pensions and savings being wiped out,

much of that debt will never be repaid.

Our standard of living is inevitably going to fall, for foreigners will not forever buy our bonds or lend us more money if they rightly fear that they will be paid back, if at all, in cheaper dollars.

We are going to have to learn to live again within our means. The party's over.

Up through World War II, we followed the Hamiltonian idea that America must remain economically independent of the world in order to remain politically independent.

But this generation decided that was yesterday's bromide and we must march bravely forward into a global economy, where we all depend on one another. American companies morphed into global companies and moved plants and factories to Mexico, Asia, China, and India, and we began buying more cheaply from abroad what we used to make at home: shoes, clothes, bikes, cars, radios, TVs, planes, computers.

As the trade deficits began inexorably to rise to 6 percent of GDP, we began vast borrowing from abroad to continue buying from abroad.

At home, propelled by tax cuts, war in Iraq, and an explosion in social spending, surpluses vanished and deficits reappeared and began to rise. The dollar began to sink, and gold began to soar.

Still the promises of the politicians come. Barack Obama will give us national health insurance and tax cuts for all but that 2 percent of the nation that already carries 50 percent of the federal income tax load.

John McCain is going to cut taxes, expand the military, move NATO into Georgia and Ukraine, confront Russia, force Iran to stop enriching uranium, or "bomb, bomb, bomb," with Joe Lieberman as wartime consigliere.

Who are we kidding? We are witnessing today how empires end. The Last Superpower is unable to defend its borders, protect its currency, win its wars, or balance its budget. Medicare and Social Security are headed for the cliff with unfunded liabilities in the tens of trillions of dollars. This is nothing less than a Katrina-like failure of government, of our political class, and of democracy itself, casting a cloud over the viability and longevity of the system.

Notice who is managing the crisis. Not our elected leaders. Nancy Pelosi says she had nothing to do with it. Congress is paralyzed and heading home. President Bush is nowhere to be seen.

Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson and Ben Bernanke of the Fed chose to bail out Bear Stearns but let Lehman go under. They decided to nationalize Fannie and Freddie at a cost to taxpayers of hundreds of billions, putting the U.S. government behind \$5 trillion in mortgages. They decided to buy AIG with \$85 billion rather than see the insurance giant sink beneath the waves.

An unelected financial elite is now entrusted with the assignment of getting us out of a disaster into which an unelected financial elite plunged the nation. We are just spectators.

What the Greatest Generation handed down to us—the richest, most powerful, most self-sufficient republic in history, with the highest standard of living any nation had ever achieved—the baby boomers, oblivious and self-indulgent to the end, have frittered away. ■

Rose-Tinted Lens

Would Iraqis greet us with flowers? I made sure of it.

By Tom Streithorst

FIVE YEARS INTO THE WAR, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and over 4,000 Americans have died. The proud and educated Iraqi middle class has been eviscerated. And America, the birthplace of rock and roll and Marilyn Monroe, the conqueror of the Nazis and the Soviets, for generations a benevolent and powerful force in the world, has been revealed as impotent and petty. The goals of transforming the Middle East, establishing hegemony over the oil fields of Iraq, and demonstrating the invincible powers of the American military have faded. Most of us, except the likes of Norman Podhoretz and Christopher Hitchens, realize the invasion was a disaster. Whom shall we blame?

Blame me. On Feb. 13, 2003, a few weeks before the invasion, I was working as a cameraman for a network news bureau in Kuwait. Our fixer told us that his cousin, a florist, planned to donate 10,000 flowers to children's charities for the youngsters to give to American soldiers to show gratitude for saving them from Saddam. It was a perfect scene: friendly Arabs, cute kids, our brave men about to go into battle. We pitched the story to our bosses in New York.

The boys at the morning show loved it—light and happy, a Valentine's Day bonbon that could still pretend to be a serious look at the impending war. The next morning, we drove to the flower shop and soon realized that we had been duped. No children's charities were involved; the florist had just mobilized his relatives' kids. Had we not agreed to film, he probably would have called the whole thing off. But we

didn't care. We had promised New York this story.

I filmed the shop, the flowers, the smiling kids. As we drove to the U.S. Army base, the florist led his nieces and nephews in chants of "We love Bush." (This did not air. Our producers thought it a little "over the top.")

The response when we pulled up was not what we had planned, not at all what the network expected. The military police, seeing three vans filled with flowers, children, and an American TV crew, incomprehensibly assumed we were terrorists intent on breaching security. They pointed their guns at us, ordered us out of the cars, and told me to stop filming.

This was not what we had promised the morning news. American soldiers terrified of flower-bearing nine-year-olds wasn't the image New York producers wanted to project, not something likely to raise our ratings. It did not matter that this story of fear and misunderstanding and the Army's preoccupation with "force protection" was more interesting, important, and real than the sappy tale we had sold.

Since the florist and his kids had an articulate TV crew with them, they were not arrested, but we were all kicked off the base. The children were disappointed, but that was not our primary concern. We had offered our bosses a Valentine's Day card, and our job was to deliver it. The setup was in the can, but we still needed our punchline: grateful soldiers receiving flowers from happy Arab children. Without that payoff, we didn't have a story.

Our producer proposed that we take our gaggle to a road near the base, and

when an American jeep stopped at the red light, the kids could hand out their flowers. No one need know of the mix-up that made American soldiers point their weapons at little girls armed with begonias chanting, "We love Bush, down with Saddam."

Many have argued that our failure in Iraq was due to the inadequate number of troops sent to police the aftermath of Saddam's fall or the absurd disenfranchisement of the Ba'ath Party (that is to say, Iraq's educated elite) or the dismantling of the army, which left armed men with no way to feed their families. These explanations are all true, but our disaster can also be attributed to the things I saw that February day at Camp Doha.

There are two lessons I want my country to learn from this misadventure. The first is that war involves death, and we shouldn't go in unless we believe the cause deserves our children's lives. If it is not worth putting the Bush twins on point in Sadr City, don't invade. Unfortunately—and probably inaccurately—our military took as the lesson of Vietnam that the American people will accept anything in war except the death of our boys. American soldiers in Iraq were thus told that any time they feared for their lives, or the lives of their comrades, they should reply with deadly force. If a car approached a checkpoint just a little too fast, and one soldier thought he just might be at risk, he was within his rights to wipe out the family inside.

This attitude taught Iraqis that to the U.S., only American life is truly human—scarcely the point of view best suited to winning the hearts and minds of an