

U.S.

To appreciate where the U.S. is at the present moment, it's helpful to understand its current economic realities.

But our country is baffling without knowing how the public mind has been shaped by its recent history.

So here's a quick cultural history lesson.

Iwo Jima

After war II, the war against Hitler, a war a war of self-defense, America's image was a champion of freedom and democracy, for which Americans had given their lives.

Our ideals made sense, our values honored. We were the undisputed economic leader of what we liked to call the free world.

Vietnam

The Vietnam War, though, was different. It split the country and in important ways we have never recovered.

During the Vietnam war, many Americans first became aware that our own government would lie to us.

For the first time, television brought the reality of what we were doing into America's living rooms.

Girl/Napalm

We saw indelible images of American power used in unconscionable ways, that caused revulsion and anger.

It destroyed our national identity

We learned about napalm.

Vietnam Protest 1

Amidst mounting protest, the president said we could not withdraw from Vietnam because America as a great power would be seen as a "pitiful, helpless giant", That if we withdrew, there would be a bloodbath as the vietcong took their revenge

My Lai

Meanwhile, we were bathing that country in blood.

We saw images of bestiality that Salvadorans later became all too familiar with, The reality of our counter-insurgency strategies.

Vietnam protest II

As protests became more militant, they offended many older Americans who were shocked to see Vietnamese flags paraded down their streets.

Those who had fought in World War II still had a heightened sense of patriotism.

Flag Burning

They were appalled by obscenities and the burning of the American flag.

Statue of Liberty

And disrespect for the most sacred of their cultural symbols.

Kent State

Increasingly militant demonstrations were met with violence and repression.

War protesters were outraged at the war the older generation seemed to be waging on the younger.

Black Panthers

America's social fabric was shredded by racial and cultural, as well as generational, divisions.

The civil rights movement now viewed Vietnam not just as a moral issue but as a racist war.

One black leader spoke of white people sending black people to kill yellow people to protect the country we'd stolen from red people.

Woodstock

Finally, a sector of youth culture experimenting with drugs and new sexual mores frightened and offended many older Americans.

Blue Collar Guys

This blend of anti-war resistance, black militancy and youth subculture allowed the right to paint its political opposition as cultural aliens.

As people who didn't share "ordinary Americans" traditional values and who threatened their lifestyles.

This legacy persists and hampers us to this day.

Martin Luther King

If in our country we have an inspirational figure who blends resistance to injustice with commitment to the poor as did Monseignor Romero, it is Martin Luther King.

He was a pioneer of the civil rights movement against oppression of African-Americans that was the continuing legacy of slavery that ended a hundred years earlier.

King March

In 1967 he launched the Poor People's March on Washington, organizing thousands of poor people all across all color lines to march to Washington and set up a massive encampment in the nation's capital, demanding jobs, housing, food and healthcare for the poor.

This action forty years ago provides the inspiration for the work of the Poor People's Economic Human Campaign represented here today.

MLK Again

That same year he publicly opposed the Vietnam war at a time that national was angrily split. In doing so he disregarded the advice of most civil rights strategists who said this

would jeopardize the movement to advance black peoples rights.

But he said the war was the enemy of the poor, black and white, thus joining the struggle of race and class.

He insisted that us that we all win together or none of us wins.

And that nonviolent does not mean passive. He was assassinated one year later, to the day.

Iran Hostages

In the late seventies, America was plagued by rising prices as it paid off the cost of the Vietnam war. Americans also felt hostage to the oil exporting countries who raised gas prices.

In 1978, some Americans actually were taken hostage, as well, by Iranians angry at our country for keeping in power the Shah of Iran, a tyrant every bit as vicious as Saddam Hussein.

Iranian Crowd

Americans didn't enjoy being berated, being powerless, being told by foreigners what was wrong about their country instead of what was good about their country.

We wanted good news instead.

Ronald Reagan

So in 1980, desperate to feel good about ourselves once more, we elected Ronald Reagan president.

He told us we were the greatest country on earth.

A Shining City on a hill.

He said it was "Morning in America"

Reagan in Hollywood

Reagan was the first president to have been a Hollywood actor, He delivered his lines smoothly and looked great on TV.

He said the solution was to shrink government, stop telling businesses what they could and couldn't do, cut taxes, and let the market work its magic.

America was ready to believe a fairy tale, which quickly became a nightmare for the poor.

Tax Rates

He cut the top tax rates paid by the richest Americans by over 200 percent, and cut corporate taxes as well.

He told us that the rich would stimulate the economy and their increased wealth would trickle down to the rest.

This created a new growth of billionaires and corporations with record profits, whose wealth of course stayed in their pockets.

Reagan Waving

He fired thousands of government air traffic controllers who were on strike and

destroyed their union.

He said the federal government would no longer be hostage to special interests, meaning working people, black people, and the disadvantaged.

He then slashed government programs for housing, education, public assistance, health care, children and the elderly.

Vegetables

President Reagan was told that his cuts in lunch programs for preschool children meant that day care centers wouldn't have enough money to buy vegetables

Ketchup

He famously answered that this wasn't true because ketchup was a vegetable. Reagan started what would be a twenty-five year campaign in the United States to sideline the government so that the rich and the corporations could do whatever they pleased.

Homeless

During this time homelessness which had been rare and considered a national disgrace, became a common sight on the streets of most American cities. While the rich partied, America began to develop an underclass that would come to resemble a third world nation.

Child Poverty Graph

As our social infrastructure fell apart, indices of the general welfare deteriorated. For example this graph up and down shows the level of child poverty in the U.S. compared with other developed countries. Left to right it shows what fraction of our budget, from less to more, that we devote to reducing child poverty. The U.S. is at the very top, and the far left.

Under Ronald Reagan's administration, Americans got their first taste of what the IMF would later inflict as on Latin America as "structural adjustment"

El Salvador

Meanwhile, our government which couldn't find funds to care for its neediest at home, spent a million dollars a day for years on proxy wars in Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

As commander in chief of the cold war, Reagan could find godless communists, pawns of the Soviet Union, anywhere. Even in Catholic El Salvador.

Knowing this, ARENA had no trouble extracting a blank check from Washington simply by labeling its enemies as Communists.

So in the eighties, U.S. counter-insurgency burned cornfields instead of rice fields. We covered up massacres in El Mozote and Rio Sumpul instead of My Lai.

Hammer and sickle/ Karl Marx

The end of the cold war deprived our government of Communism as a diversion from the problems and country faced and a way to attack its internal and external opponents. So we quickly found another war to declare.

Marijuana

The war on drugs, like the campaign against gangs in El Salvador, takes advantage of a genuine problem.

It then uses law and order tactics to selectively target poor and African American people, who are now jailed for long periods of time for minimal offenses.

Behind Bars

The U.S. now has more people in prison, and far more per capita, than any other nation. More African Americans are in jail than in college.

African Americans and Latinos who comprise 25% of the population represent 63% of the prison population.

Prisons

The drug war is not only a political strategy but has created a profitable industry. Private prison construction and operation has increased by four hundred percent since the 1990's.

In California, our largest state, more prisons were built in the last few years than hospitals.

Prison labor at about 20 cents an hour is now used by many major U.S. corporations.

George Bush I

The first George Bush, Ronald Reagan's vice-president, succeeded Reagan, and continued the dynasty of the rich.

Since a dynasty of the rich was not a popular economic program, he used racist political ads to get elected instead.

He indirectly his opponent of supporting the parole of black criminals who raped and murdered white victims.

Bill Clinton

By the time Bill Clinton became president in 1992, the country had been so shifted to the right that he had to run as a "New Democrat".

The "old" democratic party of the left had been destroyed. New Democrats stressed personal responsibility instead of government assistance.

Clinton implemented "welfare reform". This meant kicking millions of public assistance.

Party Funding

This represents the sources of funding for both major political parties, from different business sectors.

Notice two things: The Democratic Party received much more funding from labor than did the Republicans, but overall very little.

In contrast, by far the largest contributors to both parties were businesses from the financial and banking sector.

Both Democrats and Republicans have now become parties of the investor class.

Donkey and Elephant

And so we have the donkey, symbol of the Democratic Party.
And the elephant, the symbol of the Republican Party.
(Don't ask us why)
And through a triumph of American political interbreeding we now have ...

Donkeyphant

This... We're not sure what to call this animalito, but it symbolizes the one party "Republicrat" system that many in the U.S. believe rules the country. It also explains why Democrat Bill Clinton, from a party that traditionally represented the working class, became a champion of free trade policies that punished workers everywhere.

Declining Union Membership

As neoliberal policies exported U.S. jobs abroad, U.S. companies could threaten workers with further job loss unless they accepted less.

Union membership continued to decline.

By 1997, fewer than 1 U.S. worker in 6 belonged to a union.

Change in Types of Employment

Union manufacturing jobs disappear and have been replaced by jobs in the service sector. This change has been dramatic.

The top line is jobs in the service sector which tend to be low paying, part-time, without health insurance or pensions, and without unions.

The middle line is manufacturing jobs which traditionally have been higher paying, full time, without health insurance and pensions, and unionized.

Factory Floor

So the American labor landscape which used to look like this

McDonalds

Now looks much more like this.

George Bush

Ronald Reagan's revolution started by increasing the ranks of the poor

George Bush's presidency is now devoted to dividing the country into the rich, the super-rich, and everybody else.

Bush Family Portrait

He says that the United States of America is a land of unparalleled opportunity, and it is true.

This picture shows that even a man of limited talent and vision can become President of the United States, as long as his father was president, too.

In the beginning, his program to create more billionaires wasn't that popular in the country. It wasn't even clear that he had been democratically elected.

Then he got his ticket to power.

Twin Towers

The nation was traumatized by 9/11 and is only now, four years later, able to think clearly about what might make us safer.

Fireman

Our grief and fear was ripe to be exploited and diverted to a crass political and military agenda that had little to do with who had attacked us, or why.

Bullhorn moment

All the country wanted was the image of a strong leader.

This photo at ground zero has come to be known as Bush's "bullhorn moment," acting like a tough leader in a moment of crisis.

Within two years, with the help of emboldened Republicans and intimidated Democrats in Congress, Bush went to war twice, passed further tax cuts for the rich, and anti-terrorism laws that repealed basic civil liberties.

Economic Pie I

Even before George Bush's radical tax cuts for the rich, the the richest 1% owned 1/3 of the nation's wealth

The richest 10 percent owned seventy percent

And the bottom 50% owned just 3%.

Economic Pie II

The slices of this pie are little different than many third world countries, including El Salvador.

What's different is that there is still a more sizeable middle class (the large green slice).

Bush Tax Cuts

That's what the Bush administration will change.

His tax cuts after 2001 gave virtually all the money to those whose incomes are over a million dollars a year.

And that money is now cut from essential services that keep struggling families afloat.

Falling Incomes

So middle class families are now experiencing a fall in their incomes, as well as a decrease in essential services they depend on.

Health Care

That includes health care, pictured here.

Likewise, affordable housing and higher education, is increasingly out of reach of the average family.

Savings

This slide shows how much of the average American's income goes to taxes, to

consumption, or to savings.

In 2004, for the first time, the average savings rate dropped to zero percent. Most families now have no safety net.

This means that any unplanned economic hardship like an illness, accident, job loss, family death or divorce, can cause financial ruin.

Plus, the average American family already owes \$8,000 on their credit card.

Immigration

Due to free trade policies, the chief export of El Salvador and other countries is now emigrants looking for work in the U.S. to support their families back home.

Large scale immigration has also caused tension for American workers who often view illegal immigrants as competing for jobs.

Though they publicly worry about the “problem” of illegal immigration, U.S. businesses are generally happy to employ them.

Because of their illegal status, immigrants are forced to take what for Americans are low wages and are easily exploited by employers.

What’s Our Oil Doing Under Their Sand?

To be honest, no one is completely certain just why George Bush invaded Iraq, though there are many compelling theories.

“Bush Hijacked 9/11 and Flew It Into Iraq”

The one thing we do know, and the whole world knows, is that it had nothing to do with fighting terrorism.

“Think, It’s Patriotic”

But at the time, no amount of truth-telling, or logical thinking, could influence a U.S. congress afraid to be seen as weak on terrorism.

Congress granted the president authorization to attack, even though at least half the population, the U.N. and the rest of the world, opposed it.

Body Bag

Two years later, that half of the country is already furious that our children have been sent to die for a lie.

The other half of the country is just confused and discouraged.

Fewer and fewer people believe what the president says.

Shattered Windshield

Whatever the true motives of the war planners, their fantasy of establishing U.S. hegemony in the middle east has been shattered by reality.

We have already lost the war, militarily and politically.

As with Vietnam, the very last people to admit this will be the president and the generals.

Iraqi Casualties

Having learned its lesson from Vietnam, the government doesn’t permit the U.S. media

to televise this war except for carefully controlled images.

But the rest of the world sees these pictures every day.

George Bush has succeeded in uniting the world in opposition to U.S. ambitions, something the the U.S. military cannot reverse.

Abu Ghraib I

What has also been shattered is a peculiar form of national self-flattery that America is unique in history, a moral example to the world.

It is a myth that America holds dear.

Politicians pay homage to this theme every election.

Abu Ghraib II

And so our own self-image, as well as the political argument that ours is a mission of liberation, is exploded by these indelible images.

We are sickened, the world disgusted and furious, the mission doomed.

Flag Draped Coffins

These are government censored photos of killed American soldiers loaded onto a military jet for transport home.

Inside these coffins are mostly America's poor and working class children. The wealthy don't send their children, nor do they pay for the war.

This picture also points towards a funeral for the American economy.

Deficit Graph I

Like late-stage empires in the past, America has decided to wage a very expensive war with no way to pay for it.

Because we have slashed taxes on the wealthy and corporations, because we have two decades of unpaid-for defense spending and because we have exported our manufacturing base to countries with cheap labor, our treasury has for twenty five years been increasingly in the red.

Now we will add 200 billion dollars for Iraq to our credit card, in the form of selling government bonds.

Deficit Graph II

Here's another look.

This coming year, on top of Iraq, we will borrow \$200 billion more for massive hurricane reconstruction funds that we also don't intend to tax anybody for.

Foreign Debt

Much of our 6 trillion dollar debt is owned by China, which for now is willing to keep buying our treasury bonds.

In return they're able to sell their manufactured goods cheaply to us and keep their population employed.

Chinese Debt Ownership

This just shows that China is investing in larger and larger amounts of U.S. debt every year.

When China decides to stop bankrolling the U.S. government, prices and interest rates will rise sharply.

Millions of Americans will become unable to pay their already strained credit card bills and their house mortgages, their car payments, their fuel bills. The standard of living will fall

Economic Pie III

It is this next large slice of the American economic pie that will be injured by this coming collapse.

The 40% who own not much but something,

Historically in America, a steep economic slide for the majority has sown the seeds of dramatic progressive change.

Whether this will be one of those historical moments depends on how successfully we can identify who are the true threats to our welfare and who are decoys.

Hurdle

Here, there are obstacles and signs of hope.

First, the obstacles.

Hear No Evil, See No Evil

The media, owned by same large corporate interests who fund our political parties, sanitizes much of the news we receive. And TV entertainment creates a distortion lens rather than a window into our country, broadcasting a fantasy world different from the communities we actually inhabit.

Ads

Meanwhile TV commercials urge people with no medical insurance to ask their doctor for expensive medicines.

They advertise luxurious cruises for people who can't afford to take vacations.

They advertise financial consultants who service one in a hundred viewers.

All of this serves to reinforce the invisibility the lives of the poor and the sinking.

Bush Evangelists

A very worrisome development is a large and growing right wing evangelistic movement focused on non-economic issues like abortion and homosexuality.

As with Vietnam, the right-wing is busy exploiting these "culture wars".

They divert attention from peoples' economic exploitation by warning that their way of life is threatened by people who don't share their values.

Kerry/Iraq & Gay Marriage

This right-wing evangelistic sector is very mobilized politically.

George Bush won the last election in large part by changing the subject from the economy and the war.

His campaign managers arranged to have referenda on gay marriage on the ballot in key swing states. This greatly increased the turnout of aroused conservative voters,

and swung the election.

Rainbow

However, there are signs of hope everywhere.
Sometimes these come in unexpected forms.

Hurricane

Hurricane Katrina did more than add yet another 200 billion dollars to our national debt. As Salvadorans know from Mitch, it's not as easy to dismiss the message of a natural disaster than that of a political opposition.

Whirlwind/fire

And the clearest message was this:

For all its talk about safeguarding America in a war against terrorism, our government was both incompetent and criminally negligent in protecting its citizens.

Especially its most vulnerable citizens. Even from a disaster for which we had ample warning rather than no warning

Many in the country no longer believe that this government can keep them safe. And that was the key to their grip on power.

Woman Wrapped in Flag

Katrina may mark the beginning of the end of a twenty-five year campaign to shrink and marginalize government, putting the public at the mercy of unregulated, profit-driven corporations

New Orleans/Bathrub Poster

The quote above says "My goal is to cut government in half in twenty-five years, to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub"

It's from a right-wing architect of structural adjustment at home.

Now the country can better see where this thinking leads.

Stranded in River

We all watched tragedy unfold, a population abandoned, in the absence of a government mobilized to take care of all its citizens.

Wife and Shrouded Husband

This woman's husband who had lung cancer died when his oxygen ran out.

It was not lost on people that much of the national guard and their equipment, whose primary purpose is domestic emergencies, were in Iraq.

Corpse in River

With corpses floating in the streets, we looked to ourselves like any other third world country, and were ashamed,

Faces

And angry. And indignant.

Bushes Fishing

This photo is doctored, but captures the devastating political sentiment of how oblivious George Bush (pictured here with his father) is to the needs of a drowning city.

It is a long way from his magical "bullhorn moment" of 9/11, at the bottom right.

We also include this photo as special entertainment to Pedro Juan Hernandez, whose charlas on globalization always remind us that, in the end, it's a matter of big fish eating little fish.

SUV Poster

Although we are subjected to constant campaigns of diversion and deception, it looks like some realities are starting to sink in.

This is especially true of our dependence on oil in a world in which oil is increasingly scarce.

The poster says: the more gas your SUV uses, the more foreigners I have to kill. NOW do you get it?"

AARP Poster

This year, a right wing group attacked the lobby for elderly Americans against Bush's plan to privatize the national retirement plan.

This was their attack ad, using the standard formula, accusations of anti-patriotism and support for homosexuality. All of which obviously has nothing to do with Social Security, privatization, or the elderly.

The good news is that this tactic was widely condemned as both vicious and ridiculous. And that the privatization attempt is dead.

And, that even the word privatization now evokes such a negative public response that political ads have had to stop using it.

Grassroots Logos

Even though the Democratic party is weak, civil society is alive and well and organizing.

Community and independent media and the internet are disseminating a reality that network TV ignores.

Grassroots organizations at the community, state and national levels are healthy. There is new energy in the labor movement. Cross-border links are maturing.

Global Antiwar Protests

Globally, the ability for groups to network and organize together through the aid of the internet has been powerful and unprecedented.

The world-wide anti-war demonstrations in 2003 mobilized over 11 million people in hundreds of cities on the same day.

Chavez and Lula

Although CAFTA passed in the U.S. Congress it was by the thinnest of margins.

It may well turn out that the near defeat of CAFTA will make impossible the passage of the larger Free Trade Area of the Americas.

This costly "victory" may actually mark the decline of a U.S. - dominated free trade model in the hemisphere.

And a politically and financially costly war in Iraq also now constrains the U.S. from undertaking major military in its backyard, as in decades past.

So, the emergence of other centers of popular power in the Americas now makes it possible to counter what is now still a powerful empire, but an empire in decline.

MPR12

So now a globalization from below, to counter corporate globalization from above, is becoming a concrete possibility rather than an abstract idea.

With the click of a mouse, groups in Bangor, Maine or Madison, Wisconsin can access the message and experiences of their allies to the south.

Of course, it's always better to meet in person. So let's do that instead.

Que viva International Solidarity!

