

OPINION

YOUR SUBMISSIONS

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I Was Just Thinking

By Catherine Ruby

Those Deceptive Good-Old Days

As the news becomes more and more grim, I find myself spending more time looking for articles on my phone that provide a few minutes of diversion.

I usually fall for the ones about how much better things were in the “old days,” which of course I am old enough to remember.

Sometimes, of course, they contain errors — like the guy that said there were no escalators in the 1950’s and talked about elevators with employees that called out your floor.

Those, of course, did exist — and how nice for someone to have a job — but escalators go way back. Macy’s in NYC has one that is about 100 years old. It’s wooden. I rode it in 2018, having found it by accident. It was wooden, and I enjoyed the experience.

Aside from that, I remember escalators in Cleveland department stores in the 1950s. And one I vaguely remember, in the early ‘50s. I was probably about four, and for some reason my mother let go of my hand and proceeded to ride the contraption without me. I evidently panicked and refused to get on. I have a memory-glimpse of her trying to walk up the down escalator to get me.

To this day I hesitate to get on down escalators — sometimes now in the mall I just take the stairs.

Another type of article I usually click on is the one about how much cheaper things were 50 or 60 years ago. I find these interesting. Except they’re usually a little off.

For example, in 1963 I was working my first summer job at a suburban department store. There was a near-by McDonald’s where I would pick up my lunch (no drive through — walk up to the window) and drive into Cleveland Metropolitan Park to enjoy it.

The cost? About .70 for a burger, fries, and milkshake. That sounds unreal today, but googled the inflation rate. Today it would be about \$7.23.

I guess that would still be a bargain, as I found that today it could cost up to \$13. But it wasn’t quite the bargain that .70 sounded like.

Minimum wage in 1963 was \$1.25/hour. As a teenager, I doubt I made that much, but today Kentucky’s minimum wage is \$7.25. Using the same inflation scale, it should be something over \$13. That’s pretty sad.

Another example is from 1970. That fall we were moving to Long Beach for a naval assignment. Driving into the area, we stopped at a Burg-

er King. My first experience with a Whopper. And it really was! Bye-bye McDonald’s (they hadn’t introduced their Big Mac yet).

The Whopper, when it debuted in 1957, cost .37; it was still that price in 1970. Google says the price hadn’t changed because they “wanted to remain budget conscious,” and they were in competition with McDonald’s.

Today that Whopper should cost about \$3.10, but the “revamped” (whatever that means) sandwich can cost anywhere from \$6.59-\$8.50, depending on the franchise.

Looking at the cost of a fast-food meal in itself, though, doesn’t tell the whole story. In context, the median income for families in 1963 was \$6,222; in 1970, it had risen to \$9,870 — roughly \$80-84,000 today.

All of this is just to say that we have to be careful how we rate the “cheapness” of life 50 or 60 years ago; it’s all in context to the larger picture.

Given that prices today have probably inflated more than they should, more people are opting to trim their fast-food budgets. But some things probably were better.

For example, yesterday I read an article along those lines. One person remembered his neighborhood before the advent of air-conditioning. He noted that in the evenings, everyone went out and sat on their porches and visited with their neighbors.

Kids of all ages played games cross the yards. That changed, of course, when air-conditioning became standard.

Again, I remember those times. We played all sorts of games, and everyone was included (though those 3 year olds could be a pain, sometimes).

At some point in the summer there was a block party, with various neighbors hosting parts of the cook-out.

Today a lot of people don’t even know their neighbors, or there’s just as wave as you leave for work or come home. Kids stay in the house with their screens, instead of with their friends.

It’s hard to have a sense of community when . . . there isn’t one.

Maybe I should find a new hobby that doesn’t involve perusing news feeds on my phone — at some point they get sort of depressing.

I’ll think about that for a while. But first I need to run to Burger King for a Whopper.

Although these days, at my age, it’s a Whopper Jr.

War-making is the president’s business, not Congress’s

In the maelstrom of modern war, presumed certainties crumble like piecrust. Consider two questions asked in the wake of U.S. attacks on Iran.

In April 1943, American code breakers in the Pacific Theater decrypted flight plans of Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, who had conducted Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. Days later, his plane was destroyed. The New York Times headline was: “‘Gosh!’ Says Roosevelt On Death of Yamamoto.”

Was this targeted killing of a particular person of military importance an assassination? Every president since Gerald Ford, who was responding to harebrained Kennedy administration plans to kill Fidel Castro, has officially respected Ford’s finding that assassinations violate international law, and hence disserve U.S. interests.

The second question is: What is constitutionally (never mind prudentially) obligatory concerning Congress’s involvement in uses of military force? The answer is: almost nothing.

An ethical calculus that can answer the first question is elusive. And as the war against Iran illustrates, the two questions are inseparable: Surprise is a substantial military asset. If the Trump administration had briefed legislators in advance, could it have achieved the targeted killings crucial to its regime decapitation objective — an objective intended to economize violence?

Less than two years after the targeted killing of Yamamoto, on March 9, 1945, more than 300 B-29s left the Mariana Islands, bound for Tokyo. There they dropped 1,665 tons of incendiary bombs that destroyed one-sixth of Japan’s capital, killing between 80,000 and 100,000 or more. Try, without experiencing moral verti-

go, to disapprove Yamamoto’s assassination, which it was, in a war that included the incineration of Tokyo.

In 1787, the Constitutional Convention initially was going to vest in Congress the power to “make war.” Instead, it vested the power to “declare war.” (Congress has not declared war since 1942 — against Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria — many wars and other military interventions ago.) The convention did this because Congress is often dispersed, whereas presidents are on the

job 24/7. And because presidents can act with more energy and dispatch than Congress even when it is in session. And because if the power to make war were vested in Congress, the president might lack the power to respond unilaterally to sudden attacks. And because throughout history, wars have often been declared by the launching of them.

Industrialism and conscription — nations, not just militaries, mobilized for war — have blurred the distinction between combatants and civilians whose farms, factories and transportation systems sustain combat. Hence the wholesale destruction during Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman’s march through Georgia and South Carolina. Hence the World War II bombing of residential areas to “de-house” (the Allies’ antiseptic term) German and Japanese civilians. Other aspects of the modern state that have partially erased the distinction between military and nonmilitary factors are organizational bureaucracies, mobilizing propaganda, and forced-draft science (e.g., the Manhattan Project).

Albert Einstein supposedly said, “Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler.” In law, consti-

tutional and other, and in war, which is even difficult to define, we should emulate Einstein. We should make distinctions as clear as possible, but not clearer.

That our nation is planted thick with lawyers is part cause and part consequence of the American yearning for rules to govern those who govern us. Codifying behavior in order to circumscribe governmental discretion is most necessary, but most difficult, regarding executive latitude in war-making. There is only one large and clear example of Congress asserting primacy: It wielded its power of the purse to end what remained, in 1975, of U.S. participation in Vietnam.

Other than among his devotees, Donald Trump has only the trust and empathy he has earned: none. It is too late for him to prudently increase Congress’s buy-in with his Iran policy by consulting it. So, the language and processes of law are the only arrows in his critics’ quivers.

Those are, however, unavailing. Courts will not intervene where Congress is, as a practical matter, precluded by presidential nimbleness. There are many kinds of wars, and as many ways for presidents to evade Congress. Non-state actors (e.g., Hamas) can initiate and wage wars. Presidents can marginalize Congress by calling a war a “police action” (Korea, 1950).

For decades, this column has been a tireless — to some readers, a tiresome — critic of the swollen, often lawless, modern presidency. Now more than ever it is urgent to regard executive power as, in Daniel Webster’s words, “a lion which must be caged.” But conditions, threats, and capabilities change, so moral and political imperatives do, too. Changes in modern circumstances, including technologies, often strengthen, if not the argument for, then the opportunity for, executive unilateralism.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Help in an Emergency

To the Editor:

I’m writing because I want the people of the City of London to be aware of a situation that emerged during late January’s snow and ice storm. Also, I want to thank Mayor Randall Weddle, the city workers and HAL maintenance staff who deserve praise for their quick response once the problems came to light.

For years residents of The Housing Authority of London (HAL) had been told by the Housing Authority administration and staff that due to HUD regulations, the residents could not get any assistance for such emergencies as snow and ice. Everyone in Laurel County could probably agree that this 2026 storm was no ordinary occurrence. Nevertheless, residents were left on their own.

For 10 days tenants suffered immeasurably. They were prisoners in their homes due to the thick, unrelenting ice which had also encased their vehicles. Residents were forced to cancel doctors’ appointments and even surgery. For some, food was scarce.

The HAL walkways, literally sheets of ice, were untouched by maintenance. For older people, and those otherwise incapacitated, breaking a hip can put you on the freeway to eternity. Residents were scared and angry and not sure where to turn. It was inconceivable that HUD “rules and regulations” prevented maintenance staff from assisting residents, all who were old, some feeble, a few sick, and not one of them able to ice skate.

Somehow London’s Mayor Weddle heard of the tenants’ plight. I guess he knew somebody who knew somebody. With a little detective work, he made the discovery that it was not a HUD rule at all! HAL residents indeed could get assistance via the Housing Authority to have snow and ice removed. It was a HUD “law” that never really existed, yet no one had bothered to check the validity of that claim. For years. Until Mayor Weddle investigated.

I am grateful to be a representative of Housing Authority residents. For years tenants weren’t informed who their representatives were; most

were surprised to find out that they even had one! Residents have faith that the new HAL staff will listen and act expediently, and with integrity, to solve residential problems.

The surroundings of House Manor are nice, but conditions inside need to be brought into the 21st Century. These aged facilities, 60+ years, have been neglected for far too long. The mayor has seen the conditions in which we live and has expressed his interest in bringing these issues to the table to ameliorate these problems, not just put lipstick on a pig. Currently, the residents have faith that the new HAL staff, along with its Board of Directors, will listen, champion the people who live here, and act expediently to solve residential problems.

Because of the Mayor’s attention to the snow and ice problem in January, we now have money in the budget to cover such emergencies and will receive help, going forward, that was denied the HAL tenants for many years.

Helen McCoy

HAL Tenant Representative