

BY MICHAEL SCHAFFER

Bad presidents. Bad clothes. Bad hair. Two decades after the 1970s ended, the era of pet rocks and mood rings remains a favored American lampoon. "I ask my students to pick one person they think of to represent 'the '60s,'" says Boston University's Bruce Schulman. "It's either Martin Luther King or JFK. I ask for one person for the '80s, and it's often Reagan. And the '70s? It's always John Travolta."

Now, though, the joke's on us. A growing number of scholars, writers, and filmmakers have dragged this goofy decade out of the remainder bin and into the ivory-tower boutique. Their conclusion? The years between the Saturday Night Massacre and *Saturday Night Fever* were hardly the lost disco weekend of our collective memory. No, the '70s are increasingly seen as years of . . . *progress and innovation*. For better and worse: Women entered the workforce in huge numbers, the old family order collapsed, liberal economic orthodoxy got put on the shelf, and the Christian right began to rewrite the script of American politics. Instead of a sitcom laugh track, the '70s are now seen as a time when the basic outlines of much of modern American life were hammered into place.

Not that anyone actually realized it at the time. When they weren't busy pushing their AMC Gremlins to the front of gas lines, most folks were focused on crises (the fall of Saigon, the rise of inflation, the implosion of Richard Nixon) that sent the nation's self-confidence into free fall. Beneath the surface, those same crises—along with soaring crime and divorce rates—helped mold the decades to come. "From credit cards to cable, and from the decline of Keynesian economics and the rise of Bill Gates, the modernity we take for granted is a product of the '70s situation," says historian Douglas Brinkley. "It just always takes a while to notice."

Fingerprints. These days, we're noticing. Films like *54* and TV movies like *When Billie Beat Bobby* celebrate '70s phenomena like New York's Studio 54 scene and tennis's "Battle of the Sexes" between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs as major markers of American culture. The past year



alone has seen major publishing houses issue two histories of the decade—Schulman's *The Seventies* and David Frum's *How We Got Here*. The once-dissed decade's greasy fingerprints, it seems, are everywhere; shaping our politics, our economic policy, our values, culture, and daily life.

Politics. Two major phenomena informed the politics of the 1970s—and they've never really left us. The first was

the combined legacy of Vietnam and Watergate: massive disillusionment. Following Richard Nixon's resignation and pardon, the "Watergate babies" who helped Democrats pick up 49 new House seats set about reining in what historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. called "the imperial presidency." They voted for campaign reform, led high-profile investigations of the CIA, and expanded Congress's reach with an

"The disenfranchised were the blacks. . . . Now [they] are the have-nots, the unemployed, the hungry."

JESSE JACKSON, 1975



CORBIS BETTMANN



The fall of Saigon fueled cynicism. Left, a Vietnamese man tries to board an overloaded flight out of Nha Trang, April 1, 1975.

turn against Washington's elite was less comforting to liberals than Carter's election: Pols and voters alike put plenty of distance between themselves and the grand ambitions that had characterized the Democratic Party throughout the 20th century. Carter was the first Democrat of the century, in fact, whose agenda—unlike FDR's New Deal and LBJ's Great Society—wasn't known by a motto that embodied muscular ambition.

Taxes. A second phenomenon of politics in the 1970s was perhaps even more profound. That was the great tax revolt of 1978. Led by retired California businessman Howard Jarvis, Proposition 13 officially targeted the state's soaring property taxes. The underlying philosophy found voice across the country: Taxes were inherently wrong, and government, according to Jarvis, was "evil." Jarvis's point of view hasn't always carried the day, but it has endured. That same year, Tennessee voters amended their constitution to cap spending; 11 states followed. Since then, every new president—even Bill Clinton—has promised a stand against taxes.

The economy. The '70s may be remembered for shuttered factories and long gas lines. But during the decade America also crafted two cornerstones of economic policy: the determination to avoid high inflation and to reduce reliance on expensive oil. Spurred by the twin oil shocks of 1973 and 1979, inflation soared during the Ford and Carter presidencies, topping 11 percent by 1979. In other words, if you put your salary in a typical savings account, you lost money.

No wonder that as old-fashioned banking became bad money management, the '70s spawned new pools of investing and credit options—from money market accounts to new mutual funds to the credit card market that expanded fivefold in the decade after 1973 and today is ubiquitous. Consumer borrowing jumped from \$167 billion to \$315 billion in four years as Americans learned to buy today before a price hike and pay tomorrow with inflated dollars. "With double-digit inflation," says Boston University's Schulman, "thriftiness became just plain dumb." At the time, the interest rates associated with credit cards were fairly close to inflation. But after inflation dropped, those sky-high rates didn't.

President Ford's "Whip Inflation Now" buttons didn't do the trick. Carter's ultimate answer, too late to save his presidency, was a set of policies that slashed the

army of committees and subcommittees. (Many of the folks running Congress today, including Senate Democratic and Republican leaders Tom Daschle and Trent Lott, as well as House Democratic boss Dick Gephardt, were first elected back then.) Throughout the decade, voter turnout continued a post-Watergate tumble. Likewise, the '70s saw private-sector titans like General Motors brought to their

chrome-and-steel knees, as the gleaming new Japanese imports replaced Detroit's clunkers on American roads. Chrysler was even left to beg, successfully, for a bailout from the nation's taxpayers.

In Washington, revulsion against the Nixon legacy gave us Jimmy Carter, the earnest, soft-spoken Georgia governor who promised Americans he would never lie to them. But the long-term effect of the



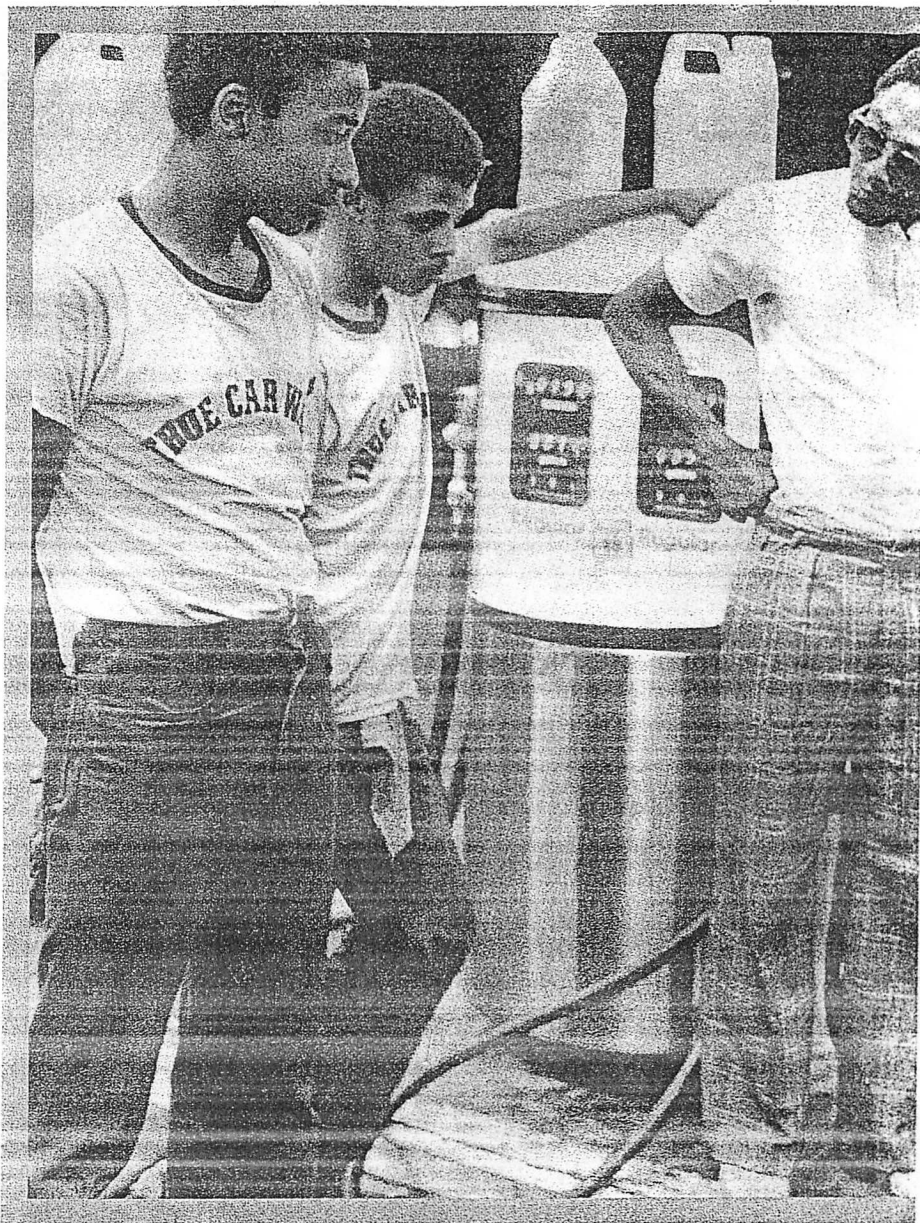
"Let's build bridges between Wall Street and Harlem. When we include, we expand, we grow."

JESSE JACKSON, 1999

money supply, reined in the budget, and hiked interest rates. "It was the end of the 'statist consensus' " under which Democratic and Republican presidents alike had supported the big spending of the New Deal, says Frum. In what came to be known as his "malaise" speech, Carter lamented that "all the legislation in the world can't fix what's wrong with America." The immediate result: a recession that in the second quarter of 1980 saw the steepest-ever plunge in U.S. gross national product. "I remember it as a very bitter time," says Thomas Geoghegan, a labor lawyer who watched Chicago's steel mills die. The longer-term result: even faster progress toward the service economy that characterized post-'70s America.

Values. In 1978, *Donahue* devoted a show to a subject that today seems almost quaint: co-ed dorms. It was a classic '70s values debate—an example of how changes associated with the sexual revolution played themselves out in the often mundane world of ordinary life. Nowhere was the ensuing change more pronounced than in the institution of marriage. In 1910, married couples headed 80 percent of all U.S. households. In 1970, it was still 69 percent. After that, it declined dramatically—to about 52 percent in 2000. The divorce rate per 1,000 population was 2.5 in 1965, 3.5 in 1970, and it didn't fall once during the decade. In 1972, 84 percent of 40-somethings were married; a decade later, the number was 67 percent. "The 1970s were the decade when big medical, legal, technological, social, emotional changes were occurring," says Martin O'Connell, fertility and family branch chief at the Census Bureau. "You started seeing a new trend with how people viewed marriage. There were changes in abortion laws in the early '70s. And an introduction of contraceptive technology, the pill, the IUD. . . ." And new no-fault divorce laws made breaking up not so hard to do.

Co-ed dorms may now be commonplace, but changing rules about family life were emotionally charged back then—and still are. "We saw an attack on marriage, the family, the homemaker, the role of motherhood, the whole concept of different roles for men and women," says Phyllis Schlafly, the durable conservative activist who emerged as a leader against the equal rights amendment, which was introduced in 1972 but never ratified. "We started out calling ourselves the alternative to women's lib. But we soon became the main story." And that was before *Roe v. Wade*, in 1973—with the exception of race, perhaps, the most emotional divide in contemporary America.



Schlafly's counterrevolution has proved far more important than '70s attention grabbers like Gloria Steinem's *Ms.* magazine. The modern "pro-family movement," which featured the founding, in 1979, of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, drove evangelicals in record numbers into the Republican Party, a sea change that would result in the election of Ronald Reagan. "What we did," Schlafly says,

"was take these cultural issues and bring into the conservative movement people who had been stuck in the pews. We taught 'em politics."

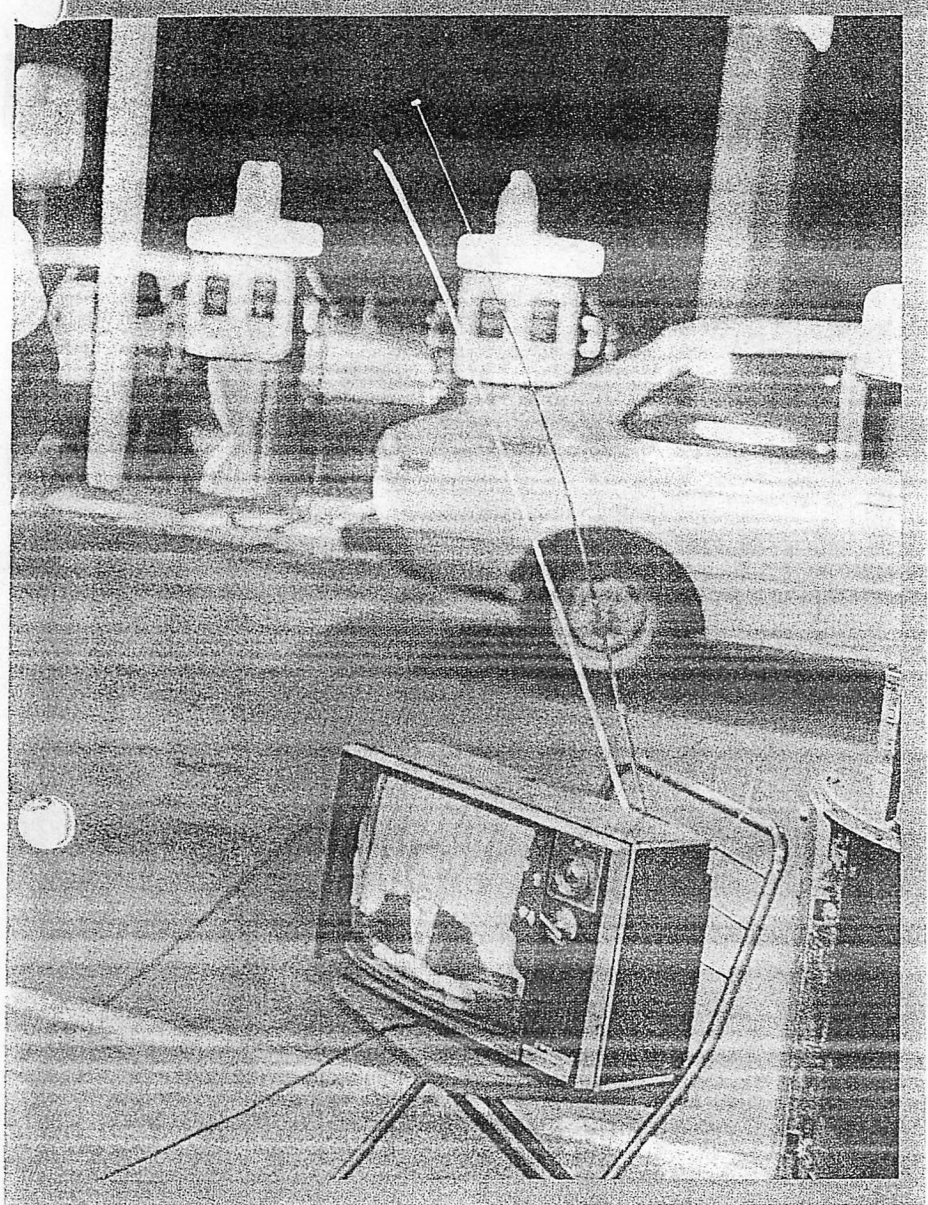
But that wasn't all. Utah's execution of Gary Gilmore, in 1977, marked a return to the use of capital punishment and opened yet another values battle over life and death that continues to play out today. As the values divide of last year's election

"Inflation itself has become a depressant on economic activity by creating uncertainty."

ALAN GREENSPAN, 1975



KEN LOVE



Gasoline was scarce, but TVs were plentiful. Left, attendants at a Mobil station in Chicago watch President Carter in 1979.

shows, the two '70s-era sides in the American culture wars are still crossing swords.

Culture. With the exception of blockbuster films like *The Godfather* and *Chinatown*, the '70s are most notable for a succession of fads and fast-buck flicks that (luckily for us) are no longer around. But what is still around is the economic structure that brought those fads to the fore back then. Call it niche-market America.

In 1969, the Woodstock festival brought a remarkably diverse blend of music—black and white, folk and electric—to a mass audience. Ten years later, though, fans dedicated themselves to a wider range of musical subsets, from disco to glam to Southern rock. Today, only the subsets have changed.

Why? You can thank two '70s-inspired trends. The first was the proliferation of

media outlets. The decade saw the birth of National Public Radio (1970), commercial cable TV (1972), and many of the so-called alternative newspapers. With so many new outlets, there was simply no more reason for the entire nation to tune into the same show. "You see niche marketing develop across the world of culture," says Schulman. "Then, at the end of the decade, cable starts to do the same thing for television." And thus, for reasons that had as much to do with economics as cultural malaise, "by the end of the '70s people are defining themselves in terms of small-group affiliation. The culture latches on to it, and still does to this day." Another signature product of the decade, the personal computer, would take this trend even further in the decades to come.

While new technologies proliferated, older ones simply became more embedded in the culture. TV, in 95 percent of U.S. households when the decade began, shaped almost everything and created an expectation that we should be able to watch history unfold, preferably live. No wonder that *Saturday Night Live*, the decade's most influential new show, was essentially television about . . . television. The show's brand of humor remains dominant today. Another reflection of a media-saturated society: the growing cult of celebrity celebration, evidenced by the founding, in 1974, of *People* magazine. (Carroll O'Connor, whose death last week prompted nationwide mourning, was at the center of lots of '70s trends: Archie Bunker was the quintessential emblem of resistance to social change, a working-class Irish-American who represented a new awareness of ethnicity.)

Daily life. Examining the exploding number of cults, gurus, and shrinks to whom Americans flocked during the '70s, Tom Wolfe famously dubbed it "the me decade." That was in 1976, in an essay in *New York* magazine. What's remarkable is that years after wacky trends like "primal-scream therapy" faded, so many '70s lifestyle innovations have stuck around, from jogging to, yes, designer jeans.

Take food, for instance. In 1972, when Gene Kahn started the New Cascadian Survival and Reclamation Project organic farm, America's beef consumption hit its historic peak. Kahn spent the year producing subpar potatoes—one batch was so unattractive that the distributor refused to sell them. But the concept took root and today organic food is a \$7.7 billion business. A culture of self-obsession natural-



"Inflation is not a significant problem at this moment. . . . But we are obviously watching."

ALAN GREENSPAN, 2001



Celebrating New Year's Eve 1978 at Studio 54. The New York club showcased a '70s trinity: sex, drugs, and celebrity worship.

ly turned on its own waistline and not long afterwards embraced what it considered good eating.

But the spread of organic eats from the commune to the strip mall ultimately happened for the same reason the decade exerts its influence over so many other aspects of modern life: Things once derided as insurgent, marginal, or simply weird were eventually incorporated into the mainstream. If consumers changed, so did Kahn. "I tried to sell barley," he says. "Nobody eats barley!" So Kahn learned to farm and sold the organic food people actually would buy. Last year, General Mills bought the farm. Annual sales now approach \$100 million. A maverick no more, Kahn remains an officer of the company.

Revisionism. The initial reviews of the '70s weren't good. "A troubled decade," declared *U.S. News* as the sands ran out on 1979 and 52 Americans remained hostage

in Iran. Early histories bore titles like *The Seventies: Counterfeit Decade* and *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*. "People dismissed it as shallow," says historian Alan Brinkley. Even today, the revisionists who study the '70s don't exactly embrace them. "The way in which those times were painful makes it hard for the trickery of nostalgia to rework the events into something positive," says Frum. While many agree that the '70s were years of tremendous influence, Schulman, a liberal, and Frum, a conservative who now works as a White House speechwriter, view its legacy in opposite—if equally hostile—terms.

Of course, if the decade that gave us *I'm OK—You're OK* taught us anything, it's that both sides can be right. America today is shaped equally by the turn toward new social freedoms that liberals adore and the turn away from state-dominated eco-

nomics that conservatives admire. In fact, the two phenomena depend on one another. Without the '70s' culture of irreverence toward hierarchy, we wouldn't have the casual-Friday capitalism of our high-tech present. And without the decade's political turn away from the egalitarian political values of the New Deal, we couldn't have made room for the vast menu of lifestyle options we now know.

Twenty years after the '70s ended, its dominant social trends, locked together in an uncomfortable but enduring embrace, still define the way we live our lives. "The questions that contemporary America raises for us as interpreters of politics and culture end up always sending us back to the '70s, and not the '60s, to find out how we got here," says Schulman. Which means the '70s—shag carpeting and all—will probably be with us for a long, long time. ●

"Ya know, I spend a long time on my hair, and he hit it; he hit my hair."

JOHN TRAVOLTA, *SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER*, 1977



"Not everything ends the way you think it should."

JOHN TRAVOLTA, *SWORDFISH*, 2001

Sarcastic language, ironic pose

BY ROGER SIMON

The '70s? Don't get me started on the '70s. Shove those Bee Gees albums on the floor and pull up a beanbag chair. We've got a few minutes until the *Mary Tyler Moore* rerun comes on.

The first thing you have to remember about the '70s is that the baby boomers, the ones born in the years immediately following World War II, were graduating from college. Having saved the world, we were now ready to run it. We had been shaped by the '60s: by revolution and unrest, by demonstration and assassination. And now we were preparing to go forth, start families, get fat, and become our parents. No wonder we were angry all the time.

So it is now the mid-'70s and a college decides to do a retrospective on the '60s and I'm invited to come and speak. I get to campus and my student host explains that at graduation his class intends to streak across the stage.

"Streaking means taking your clothes off and . . ." he begins to explain, and I tell him that I know what streaking is. He senses I am vastly unimpressed. "So what did your class do?" he asks.

I pause. "We ended the war in Vietnam," I say.

Was I being unfair? Of course. Were political apathy, streaking, smiley faces, and disco not only harmless

but an antidote to the superheated '60s? Sure. And certain things about the '70s were undeniably better than even today. True, we lacked laptop computers and cellphones, but we also lacked HIV and AIDS. Dates were much more likely to begin with the question, "What's your sign?" than the question, "Do you have any incurable and/or deadly diseases I should know about?"

There were certainly things to mourn about our growing up—the '60s had given us John and Bobby while the '70s gave us the Dead Kennedys—but shifting the agenda away from discussions like "Should I boycott grapes?" to "Who do you like better: the Captain or Tennille?" was a way of dealing with the pain. So much of what we did and were in the '70s was an attempt to avoid getting burned again. Which is why sarcasm was our language and irony our pose. In the '60s we really said things like "Far out!" and "Out

of sight!" But sometime in the '70s I remember friends saying, "Far South!" and "Out of state!"—a conscious mocking of the way we used to talk. We were too cool to fall for anything like enthusiasm in the '70s. It was far safer to be indifferent: If you didn't believe in anything, you didn't have to defend anything. And if you had no expectations, then you had no disappointments.

I entered the '70s knowing three things with certainty: I would never fall into the trap of going after the big bucks.

I would never sell out. I would never lose my hair. Today, I know I will never fall into the trap of going after the big bucks.

Cynical? If cynicism wasn't invented in the '70s, it sure was perfected. And with Vietnam and Watergate didn't we have something to be cynical about?

Glimmers of hope. Then in 1978, I went to South Africa. It was the deep, dark days of apartheid. I wanted to go to Soweto, the vast, black township outside Johannesburg, and one night a resident smuggled me past the police by hiding me under a blanket on the floorboards of his car. I was in no danger. Had I been caught, at most I would have been kicked out of the country. Had he been caught, he could have been imprisoned or worse. After a night of interviewing people and after he smuggled me back out, I asked him why he had risked it. "You are an American," he said. "You will

tell our story. And someday we will be free." Cynicism? He didn't know what that was. He lived without electricity but with tuberculosis, without schools for his children but with constant humiliation for himself, without freedom for Nelson Mandela, who had been in prison for 15 years and had 12 to go, but with never a day that lacked hope.

And if this man believed in America, how could I not? So that was the '70s, too.

OK, *Mary* is about to start. It's the one where Chuckles the Clown dies. Yeah, you know the one. "A little song, a little dance, a little seltzer down your pants." I think that was the official motto of the '70s. But you know what? We still have a lot of decades ahead of us. Decades we can have fun with, but decades we should never, ever waste. So go in peace.

And rock on.



Carroll O'Connor

Born in 1971, Archie Bunker was TV's first unvarnished dad. He told his wife to "stifle" and tossed out slurs like "Hebe" and "spic." Young folks laughed at his dysfunctional yet loving family while older viewers related to his fear of the changing world, says curator David Bushman of the Museum of Radio and Television. "[Bunker] wasn't a hater," says Norman Lear, the show's creator, of the lovable bigot Actor O'Connor, who pulled off the delicate balancing act, died last week at 76. His character lives on in reruns and in the Smithsonian, which enshrined his armchair. As Archie would say, "Case closed."