

The ubiquitous American report card

I remember my grade school report card day, vividly. It was a time of reckoning and a time to own up to my shortcomings and a chance to shine in the sunlight of my accomplishments. The cards were passed out just before the school day ended, usually on a Friday, and we were told to get them signed by our parents and to bring them back no later than the following Monday. The smart kids never worried. They looked forward to carrying their grades home to mom and dad and to the pats on the back they would get for a job 'well done.'

The rest of us who struggled to get by in tough subjects made the cards soaking wet with the nervous sweat from our chubby hands. I hasten to add that these "messages from Garcia" weren't sealed, so we could peek at the comments made by our teachers on our participation in class, our preparedness (or lack thereof), our attendance, our behavior and our 'work ethic'. We were also judged on how well we interacted with our classmates – in the classroom and on the playground.

Our teachers covered everything that mattered to a parent, and before we left for the day, we were told that we would need to talk with our folks about every single grade or rating we were given. Their signature would certify that they had seen the card and had talked with us. The nuns that taught me were demanding but mostly fair. Deep down, they wanted us to succeed, but unlike today's teachers they weren't going to treat us like 'snowflakes' that would melt under a little heat. Tough but fair and trust but verify could have been the motto sewn on their habits.

Everybody gets tested by somebody and our performance is always being assessed by all sorts of people whether we know it or not. So is the performance of our Congress, our Senate and our President. To that list I will add the current crop of Presidential wannabes and local officials.

Let's start with our local officials. Chances are we know some of them, personally, and we either trust them or we don't. We know how they stand on issues that affect our lives, locally. But what about the candidates running for the House and Senate? What do we really know about them aside from their websites, their TV interviews, a few town hall meetings and newspaper clippings? Have we pressed them on their stances on social issues, the economy, their attitudes on immigration, the justice system, healthcare? If we haven't bothered to ask the tough questions then we deserve the vague answers we get. And do our House and Senate representatives remember why they were chosen to represent us in the first place?

Frankly, I have my doubts. Election Day comes and goes and 60 plus percent of us vote, and then we go back to living our normal lives, all the while hoping that we made the right decision when we were alone in the voting booth. Did we vote our conscience? Did we vote impartially, based on the facts or did we vote the way we've always voted by pulling the lever for all Democrats or all Republicans? Or worse, did we vote blindly, without knowing a single thing about the candidates? What motivated us to vote the way we did? Self-interest? The influence from our husbands or wives, our parents or our peers?

Did we cast our ballot based on the sum total of the candidates' positions or was it just one issue that moved us? Did we vote with our head or with our heart? This coming election year may be the year when we see an uptick in participation by younger voters. For those of us way past the age of consent, this is a mixed blessing. We remember what **we** were like when we came of voting age. Many of us were not political and viewed voting as something older people did. My parents' were teenagers during the Depression, and their childhood helped shape them (and their votes later) and it had a strong influence on me. Those of us in the Midwest (what some of the elite folks today call 'flyover country') experienced America during its 'gratitude phase' as it rebuilt itself after the war.

Patriotism wasn't some passing fancy or fad. It was real. We all felt a lump in our throat when the VFW or the National Guard marched down the cobblestone streets of our small town carrying 'Old Glory' and sporting polished helmets and crisp uniforms.

They were an inspiration to me as were the Independence Day speeches given by local dignitaries. I'm aware that some cynics would say that these scenes were just old-style propaganda made to give the impression of America as a superpower that only existed because of its military might.

In my hometown, we'd call those people ignorant...or worse. They'd get a failing grade on the subject of patriotism. We knew, even as children, that people had sacrificed much so that we could spend our days whiling away our hours in play. Why? Because our parents and grandparents took the time to TELL US about those sacrifices. They wanted us to know that life wasn't always so carefree and that history didn't begin with our birth. My grandfather talked about mustard gas and trench warfare and made sure that I didn't see dying on the battlefield as something romantic.

Granted, Hollywood obliged us with WWII films that depicted us as the 'good guys,' but Hollywood wasn't the only source of information about that terrible war. There were plenty of 'old timers' - lads that joined up right out of high school - that told me about Guadalcanal, the Battle of the Bulge, Pearl Harbor and the concentration camps. There was no shortage of real human contact with people who had seen and experienced the worst life could (and did) throw at them. We respected these men and the women that served, for their sacrifice. Some of them ran for Congress, and we knew their back stories and how their bravery and fortitude was tested. We were sure they would battle on in the House or the Senate floor just like they did overseas.

America was changing faster in the big cities than in rural Wisconsin where I grew up. Crops still needed to be planted and harvested and livestock still needed tending to. God hadn't gone out of style and churches were full on Sundays. People were beginning to understand why segregation was wrong and laws were enacted to reflect that fact. Businesses were beholden to their customers and were important to the communities they called home. We didn't need watchdog agencies to police them. Their consciences did that.

We were grateful for a job in a growing economy, and did our best to be the best at it, whether we were packing groceries, frying up a burger or plowing a field. We didn't covet each other's wealth or wish ill on those who had made it big. We congratulated them and then tried to replicate their success, ourselves. There were no 'authority figures' only people older and wiser than ourselves who had important jobs to do, like teach us about life. We never questioned these people about their bona fides though we might have questioned their teachings. That was, after all, what a good education was all about...learning from the discussion.

Our speech wasn't peppered with cuss words. We didn't need them to express an emotion or show disfavor. We knew the difference between decent speech and unacceptable speech and the destructive power of an unkind word. We also knew that the person you cussed out today might be your boss a few years from now. If nothing else, we were practical about such things.

We also knew the difference between make-believe and reality. Saturday matinees at the local theatre might have made us more excitable for a few hours after seeing Audie Murphy or John Wayne, but that wore off when the reality of chores reared its head. There was nothing political about my youth, and I couldn't tell you if my parents were Republicans or Democrats because we didn't have those kinds of dinner table conversations. I do know they were Christians, however, because I went to two church services every Sunday; one Protestant for my father and one Catholic for my mother.

People in my town weren't preachy, but they were quick to give us wise guys our comeuppance and a failing grade if we did something wrong, even if our parents weren't around. That was the thing about a small community; everybody was your parent or guardian. You were never in any danger as long as an adult was nearby. As we got older and became more interested in things like souped-up cars and rock and roll, our values sometimes took a backseat to more exciting pursuits...but they were always there with us, lying in wait for a conscience pang to trigger their emergence. Our upbringing didn't afford us an excuse for doing the wrong thing.

We couldn't, because our upbringing taught us right from wrong.

Every generation complains about the one that comes after it. That's only natural because we don't want to believe that all the hard work we did will be squandered by some young whippersnappers. The same is true of the current Administration that doesn't want its good work undone by people who don't share their philosophy. No political special interest group wants to admit it can't achieve its objectives and no one wants to concede that our opponents' ideas are better than ours. These days we're too quick to condemn and way too slow to forgive.

It's going to be damn hard if not impossible to reverse the course we're on through one election alone, especially when so few Americans remember or know their history. We've made many of the same mistakes before that we're making now, and anyone who's lived a few years knows that. I desperately want to have faith in America's youth. I really do, but it's getting harder with each passing day and with each example by some Congressional Representative who's proving that there's no statute of limitations on ignorance.

Yes, the younger voter is gaining on us. My generation is coming into the homestretch of the voter sweepstakes. The youth voter may soon overtake us and that presents a challenge in the form of a decision. Should we just accept the inevitable and leave our kids to the forces of social media and the powerful ideological billionaires to figure out things like socialism, income disparity, the environment and racism...or should we muster the courage and energy to engage these young voters of generations X, Y and Z before it's too late and give them an alternative to new age propaganda before we cash in our chips? My answer reflects my generation and my roots. I'm a Midwesterner, and we don't quit working until the work is done, and that brings me to some voter statistics.

Let's look at the last seven Presidential elections. Since 1992, we've averaged around 53% voter turnout. The highest year was 2008 with the election of Barack Obama and the lowest was 1996 with the re-election of Bill Clinton. The highest turnout of all time was in 1876 at 81.8%. It was an election that was hotly disputed and the results became known as the Compromise of 1877 or the Great Betrayal. It was an informal, unwritten deal that resulted in the United States federal government pulling the last troops out of the South, and formally ended the Reconstruction Era. After the Compromise, a few Democrats complained loudly that their man had been cheated and there was talk of forming armed units that would march on Washington.

President Grant was ready for that, however. He tightened up military security around the city, and nobody marched on Washington. I guess Congress and the White House got a passing grade on that one. In 1968, when LBJ decided not to run for a second term, the voter turnout was 60.7%. Nixon managed to convince the electorate that he would end 'LBJ's war.' He eventually did, but not before escalating it. As an aside, compare Nixon's nearly 32 million popular votes in 1968 to Donald Trump's 62 million popular votes 48 years later. It took the war in Vietnam to mobilize the youth vote in both the 1968 and 1972 Presidential elections. Ever since the voting age was lowered to 18 (in 1972) young people have been under-represented at the polls and the turnout has decreased markedly. Seven out of ten young people didn't vote in the 1996 election. It can be said that Barack Obama got an 'A' in his election of 2008. As the Pied Piper of the youth vote, he managed to triple and even quadruple the number of youth voters in some states with a 52% score. This dropped back to 50% in 2016. (Hillary Clinton got 55% of the youth vote and Donald Trump only came away with 37%.)

When Donald Trump was inaugurated in January of 2017, the U.S. unemployment rate was 4.7% and the figures for the chronically unemployed were in the double-digit range. The economy was faltering and American consumer confidence and that of Wall Street was in the doldrums. Now, the unemployment rate is around 3.6%, the lowest it's been in 50 years! Hourly wages are rising, albeit slowly. Minority unemployment is at an historical low.

It may be a bit unfair to echo Barack Obama's words about 'not building that' (alone) when talking about our economic rebound, but Donald Trump knows he didn't single-handedly create the lowest unemployment numbers in half a century. However, he has the right to take credit for creating an atmosphere of confidence that inspired businesspeople to re-invest in their businesses, create jobs and to return some production back home. For that, the President deserves an 'A+'.

Our national indebtedness is another matter, entirely. At \$23 trillion, it's surprising that anyone would want to buy our debt, but as P.T. Barnum said, "There's a sucker born every minute." China is that sucker now, but we are right there with them. China's ambitions are transparent: they're intent on dominating our domestic market with manufactured goods; they want a stranglehold on our financial markets and are keen on siphoning off as much of our own manufacturing sector as they can to create jobs in their own country and keep their economy growing.

The President understands that and has chosen to be both good cop and bad cop to delay what many economists believe will be the inevitable...China's rise to the top of the economic pyramid that is built on the theft of patents and proprietary processes and knowledge. This is one of the reasons for the imposition of tariffs on Chinese-made goods. The President is also convinced that if he can get more U.S. companies to stay in the U.S. and create more jobs he will keep the economy on an even keel and slow China's growth. Unlike his predecessor, Mr. Trump understands business and knows how to leverage his assets. Barack Obama only knew how to leverage his rhetoric. So, on the economy in the short-term, the President gets an 'A+'. On his longer-term China strategy he gets a passing grade. Time will tell if it turns into an 'A'.

Americans like winners, and so do American voters. In times of economic stability or economic upturns they re-elect their Presidents. In economically tumultuous times or when they perceive their Presidents to be either weak or ineffectual they change horses in the middle of the stream. Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush were both one-term Presidents. (Lyndon Johnson saw the hand-writing on the wall and took the second-term hemlock on his own rather than waiting for it to be administered by the electorate.) I must admit that I thought that Donald Trump would pass on a second term, but then, I didn't know Donald Trump very well.

No top CEO or President wants to relinquish the reins of power when he feels that the wind's at his back. THAT is Donald Trump, a man with a Kevlar ego and unmatched self-confidence. That was even true of Presidents who were facing a strong headwind like Bill Clinton during his impeachment proceedings. Clinton read the tea leaves, correctly. He knew he could power through public sentiment and come out victorious even after the House impeached him. Clinton's popularity with his base actually increased and he was able to 'compartmentalize' or ignore what most people would call a defeat. Had Clinton been able to run for a third term, I think he might have won.

That brings us to the impeachment hearings against President Trump. Can Trump pull a 'Clinton' and emerge stronger than ever if the Democrat-dominated Congress votes to impeach him? Or will the Congress stop short of impeaching him and censure him, instead, leaving the American voter to decide if they want four more years of him in November of 2020? While Trump has the support of his base, his base is smaller than the Democrats' AND he doesn't have the crossover appeal to swing the average Democrat his way. Why? Because the average Democrat is no longer a moderate as in the Kennedy years and cannot be persuaded to buy into the Trump Doctrine of *America First*, nor do they like his style. In fact, they hate it. To many of them, crossing over would be like inviting a child predator onto their kids' playground.

So far, the President has stood his ground and he gets an 'A' for effort. His constant rallies and his railing against the Democrats for conducting 'witch hunts' and 'show trials' have resonated with millions of his followers. As a strategist and master marketer he has shown himself to be both resilient and creative, but one wonders if he can keep saying the same things to the same people and expect them to stay on his 'magical impeachment mystery tour bus' all the way to election day.

One of his aces in the hole is the Democrats' long memory for what happened to Republican candidates, post-Clinton impeachment. San Fran Nancy Pelosi is no fool. She knows that she has some members who represent constituencies that could go Red in 2020 if the voters feel that their party has wasted their mandate and has led the country on a 'wild goose chase.'

Impeachment is not a legal exercise; it is a political one, and the Democrats know they are on shaky ground. To go down that road would waste more time and more millions of dollars like the Mueller Report did, and even Democrats can see that being perceived as being wasteful and petty and will not help their poll numbers. So, Trump gets a passing grade for staying the course.

There is a poem by Rudyard Kipling that I would like you to read. I think it sums up what is expected of a great leader. It is entitled, "If."

"If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too;

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting, or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or, being hated, don't give way to hating, and yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;
If you can dream—and not make dreams your master; If you can think—and not make thoughts
your aim; If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same;

If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken, and stoop and build 'em up with worn out tools;
If you can make one heap of all your winnings and risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings and never breathe a word about your loss;

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew to serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you except the Will which says to them: "Hold on";
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, or walk with kings—nor lose the common touch;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you; If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds' worth of distance run— Yours is the Earth
and everything that's in it, and—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!"

Every President must get his report card signed by the voters, and all of you will have your chance to weigh in a little less than a year from now. That is unless the Congress chooses to expel this truly exceptional student of 21st century politics from our Nation's 'school.'

Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of three books on American politics and seven others and has written over 1,000 articles on politics, economics and social trends. He can be reached at: stephan@stephanhelgesen.com