

ED WALLACE

## It's Not Left vs. Right

BY ED WALLACE  
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The first of the Baby Boomers were born in 1946 and came of legal age during the Summer of Love in 1967 — in a world far different from the one our parents, born in both the so-called Greatest and Silent Generations, experienced as they came of age and began careers. After all, just six years before the first Boomers were born America was still trying to dig its way out of the Great Depression, and the world was dealing with the Second World War. While our generation's biggest crisis of 1967 was ... OK, we didn't have any crisis to deal with that year.

By and large, our world was still being created for us. Our interstates were under construction and were within a few years of completion, the U.S. economy was creating opportunities for most everyone, minimum wage bought much more than it does today, and our large international airports were either under construction or in the process of being approved. OK, the Boomers did have a personal crisis to deal with: Less than half of all new cars sold in that year had air conditioning, and our schools just didn't.

So, most of us, meaning those who grew up in the middle class or better, had a hard time imagining or empathizing with those who had nothing, or who had suddenly lost everything. Yet that was the exact landscape that our parents and grandparents lived through in this country and overcame, to ensure that we had something better.

Less than two decades before the first Boomers came into the world there was a stock market crash of 1929 and the consequent Great Depression. Worse, in those times there was no protection for those who had money in the banks; when your bank failed, your money was gone. But even if your bank didn't go under, in a day without government programs such as Social Security, our elders either worked until they dropped or often became dependent on their children for their final years. Boomers should remember part of that equation, because until Medicare and Medicaid came into being in the mid-Sixties, most families had their elderly relatives in their last days to deal with.

Maybe it was the speed at which the American economy fell apart in the early Thirties that made it so brutal. The American auto industry produced 5.3 million new vehicles for sale in 1929, 2 million fewer the following year, and only 1.3 million vehicles in 1931. That's right, a 75 percent drop in overall vehicle production and sales. Henry Ford at first claimed the Depression was simply a state of mind; he actually increased his workers' pay to prove that corporations could reinflate the economy by paying higher wages and therefore keeping consumer spending high. Of course, that didn't last long. Ultimately, Ford slashed wages and let go half or more of his workforce; and, adding insult to injury, he publicly started blaming the American workforce as the primary cause of the depression — saying they created their own misery by being so lazy.

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While many figures and stats from that period can be questioned, it is widely accepted that American autoworkers earned right at \$1,600 a year in 1929. Those who still held onto their jobs two years later received just \$750. Unsurprisingly, it is said that by 1932 four people a day were dying of hunger in Detroit. But in that way, it was no different from the Panic of 1893. When Ford was building his first Quadracycle in his outdoor shed in 1896, his wife Clara often fed the homeless children roaming the streets of Detroit. It seems that during that financial depression destitute parents often stole away in the middle of the night and abandoned their kids. Stories claimed 10,000 children met that fate in Detroit.

Those who had lost their jobs were desperate and their legitimate financial fears often made them irrational. Fear combined with no hope has a funny way of doing just that. Corporations may seem heartless, but most had neither the production nor the wherewithal to rehire tens of thousands of desperate workers they no longer needed. Still, on March 7, 1932, a day the Detroit newspaper called one of that winter's coldest days, somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 unemployed autoworkers decided to march on the Ford River Rouge factory with a list of 14 demands for Henry Ford. Their demands included getting their jobs back, raises, cash up front, no evictions, a seven-hour day, no speed-up of the assembly line, no more discrimination in hiring, and even freeing the Scottsboro Boys.

That protest was organized in part by the Trade Union Unity League, which included members of the Communist party. Of course, those marchers were usually described as radicals, but a more accurate description would have been the truly desperate. The marchers were told in speeches that no violence would be tolerated, that this was simply a peaceful march to raise people's awareness of how the financial crisis was hurting families in Detroit. However, just as they crossed the city limits from Detroit into Dearborn, the local fire department opened wide their hoses on an overpass — soaking the protesters, on a frigid winter day.

Then the Dearborn police used tear gas to turn the protesters away. And that led many of the men, soaked by the freezing cold water and eyes burning from tear gas, to run into the fields, grab stones, and start throwing them at the policemen. Now Ford's private security army, led by Harry Bennett, joined local police, drew their weapons, and started firing into the crowd of desperate protesters. Three were killed immediately, and 22 others were wounded by the gunfire.

At that point the protesters turned and tried to make an orderly retreat, but a machine gun was opened up on them, this time killing 16-year-old Joe Bussell. Again, dozens more were wounded.

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The next day the *Detroit Times* wrote that Harry Bennett and four police officers were wounded by gunshot. In fact, no authority figure was ever fired on. Twenty-five Dearborn police were wounded by those rocks thrown after the tear gassing, but nobody was shot but protesters. A grand jury was convened, but no indictments against police brutality were forthcoming — though Harry Toy, the prosecutor, claimed the police could have been a bit more discreet and rethought the way they used force. Five days later maybe 50,000 – 60,000 in Detroit joined the funeral procession for the four who died.

Five years later came the Battle of the Overpass, in which Walter Reuther and members of the UAW were savagely beaten by Harry Bennett and other members of Ford's private security force. This time public opinion changed, as Americans saw victims' photographs on the front pages of their newspapers and turned on Ford. But the person who really had had enough of this nonsense was Henry's own wife, Clara. Yes, the same Clara Ford who, 31 years earlier, had fed the abandoned children of Detroit on her back porch while husband Henry was building his first car. Now she told her husband that either he could stop the violence, recognize the union, and start treating his employees better, or she would leave him.

That's right, Clara Ford is the real hero of this story. She always has been and isn't recognized for that, either.

But if you go back and read this story and the facts as history has recorded them, this was not a battle between left or right. No, throughout history it is always a battle between the powerful vs. the powerless. It also seems that when the powerless reach the point of desperation, and see no hope for a better future, then incidents like these are the likely outcome. At the time the powerful blamed radicals and Communists for the problems, when in reality the root core of the problems occurred only because of the financial despair the entire nation was experiencing. Everyone in America was in the same boat, some just had a few more bucks than others.

That is the world our parents and grandparents saw. Stories like that abound in the Great Depression, then that level of destructiveness went worldwide with the Second World War. If one counts the time it took to restore a civilian economy after that war, our previous generations wasted 20 years of their lives immersed in crises, ones they felt helpless to correct. On the other hand, the Second World War restored the public's view of our auto industry after the labor battles of the Depression when it turned into the Arsenal of Democracy.

Now look at what those generations did for us over the next few decades. The less powerful in America were given a bit more of it and the most powerful were dialed back just a bit. That combination built the America Boomers inherited without our fully understanding how that came to be. However, it seems lately that cycle might be starting again. If you doubt that, think about how this story sounds just like the recent news of today.

*Ed Wallace is a recipient of the Gerald R. Loeb Award for business journalism, bestowed by the Anderson School of Business at UCLA, and hosts the top-rated talk show, *Wheels*, 8:00 to 1:00 Saturdays on 570 KLIF AM. Email: [edwallace570@gmail.com](mailto:edwallace570@gmail.com)*

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