



Remembrance of Things Past

Francis J. Gavin

In his introduction to Volume 8, Issue 1, the chair of our editorial board, Frank Gavin, considers the importance — and the challenge — of putting the past, present, and future in perspective.

In December 1964 — 60 years ago — the holiday classic “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” was aired in the United States for the first time.¹ The following year, “A Charlie Brown Christmas” was televised.² One year later, in December 1966, “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” premiered.³ All three were tremendous successes, and for many American families, watching them has become an annual ritual, marking the season of joy and holiday celebration. I loved them as a child, loved introducing them to my children even more, and anticipate viewing them with my grandchildren, should, *inshallah*, I get any.

There are at least two puzzling questions, however, about the seemingly timeless success of this Christmas triumvirate.

First, why were arguably the three most popular American Christmas specials produced within two years of each other, in the mid-1960s, and never dethroned or replaced? Consider the financial and cultural incentive to produce a holiday classic watched year after year, embraced by every new generation. There have been some contenders to this classic status — I watch Will Ferrell’s *Elf* every December, and *The Muppet Christmas Carol* with the inestimable Michael Caine is underrated. But in the animated world, despite profound advances in technology and vast improvements in the quality of television overall since my childhood, no show has even come close to matching the holiday staying power of Rudolph, Charlie Brown, and the Grinch. They were not produced in some golden age of television — the most watched shows produced by these networks at the time included such unwatchable dreck as *Hogan’s Heroes*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and a hilariously terrible *Batman* (shown two nights a week!). The success of the Christmas specials is all the more surprising as the creators of these shows never anticipated such long-term success. Why should they have? Rudolph’s stop-action animation was directed by an artist who had previously made propaganda films for both Imperial Japan and Communist forces in China, the creators of the Peanuts special thought after screening the special that “they had ruined Charlie Brown,” and the production of the Grinch was fraught and over budget.

There is a second puzzle to the unanticipated but enduring success of these shows: many of the characters and plotlines are unspeakably unpleasant. The Santa Claus in Rudolph is a tyrannical man-baby, made grumpy by an obvious eating disorder, ruthlessly exploiting elves in a Dickensian workshop and shaming and casting out a child reindeer for being different. Rudolph’s parents don’t even defend him; his only supporters are his love interest Clarice and a closeted aspiring elf-dentist. It is only after they join forces with an itinerant prospector, cruelly defang the abominable snow monster, rescue discarded, deformed presents exiled to the polar toy version of Elba — ruled for unknown reasons by a winged lion — and save Santa’s neck by piloting his sleigh through a dangerous storm, that Rudolph is redeemed and embraced.

Charlie Brown is even worse. A band of feral, unparented children — one an unbathed public health menace called “Pig Pen” — roaming near-arctic conditions in the upper Midwest, torment and torture a slow-witted, balding child who, power-mad after unexpectedly being named director of the community play, squanders his writ and presumably the theater’s coffers when he is ripped off purchasing a tiny, dying tree. After watching other children demand real estate and cash for Christmas — Charlie Brown’s sister Sally shouts, “All I want is what I have coming to me! All I want is my fair share!” — the characters are reminded of the true meaning of Christmas when a thumb-sucking, blanket-wielding child quotes New Testament verses.

The weirdness of the Grinch hardly needs explanation — it’s all in the title — though the physics and logistics of (him?) stealing, then returning, all the town’s presents, foods, and lighting fixtures in a single night through the strained efforts of a cruelly whipped 15-pound mutt, climbing and descending steep mountains, defies even animated credibility. If none of this strikes you as odd, imagine how a Netflix or Hulu pitch meeting would go today if these plot lines and characters were suggested.

1 Michelle Delgado, “The Magical Animation of ‘Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,’” *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 23, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/magical-animation-rudolph-red-nosed-reindeer-180973841/>.

2 Carrie Hagen, “The ‘Charlie Brown Christmas’ Special Was the Flop That Wasn’t,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 9, 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/charlie-brown-christmas-special-history-television-classic-cbs-180957490/>.

3 Rhianna Malas, “‘How the Grinch Stole Christmas’ Almost Didn’t Happen,” *Collider*, December 23, 2023, <https://collider.com/how-the-grinch-stole-christmas-tv-special/>.

Putting the Past, Present, and Future in Perspective

I take two lessons from the Christmas special paradox. First, we are not very good at making accurate predictions about which contemporary phenomena will last and which will be fleeting. No one could have anticipated that Rudolph, Charlie Brown, and the Grinch would remain wildly popular holiday staples more than a half a century after they were created. Whether it is politics or culture, the truth is, we often have little idea which parts of our contemporary landscape are important and lasting, and which are fleeting and ultimately unimportant. I often refer to this as chronological proportionality: far more often than we realize, the issues that dominate our current cultural, social media, and news landscape dissipate and disappear over time, while few can successfully predict which artefacts and events will be lasting and leave meaningful historical imprints. What thrills or terrifies us today is often quickly forgotten, and what inspires and transforms over the long haul is rarely recognized at first.

The second lesson involves how we remember the past. The popularity of these three shows is clearly steeped in our collective nostalgia. But nostalgia for what? We often think of the past as a more innocent, rosier, and better and simpler place that we long to return to. But no one wants their children to live like Charlie Brown or his thoughtless, often cruel comrades, and Santa and the Grinch would be cancelled, if not arrested, if they behaved as they did in their specials. The period 1964 to 1966 when the shows were made is especially interesting, because we often associate those years with a calm, ordered, prosperous America, a time before the Vietnam War, clashes over race, class, and gender, and political corruption culminating in Watergate brought the country to a far darker place. But read Rick Perlstein's brilliant biography of Barry Goldwater, *Before the Storm*, together with his *Nixonland*,⁴ or closely watch the hit series "Mad Men," and you are reminded that this nostalgia for pre-1968 America is misplaced. The United States of the early and mid-1960s was far more cruel, racist, misogynistic, corrupt, dangerous, and unjust than today.

I've been puzzling over the Christmas special paradox as I try to make sense of our current political landscape, in the days after the re-election of Donald Trump to a second, non-consecutive term as the president of the United States. One does not have to do a deep dive into my past writings to know how I feel about this result.⁵ How concerned should we be? Serious historians suggested that Trump and his movement resemble aspects of fascism and pose a threat to America's institutions and democracy.⁶ Others argue that his election was politics as usual, while still others (including presumably many of the voting age majority who ushered him to an impressive victory) regard him positively as a transformative figure.

Seeking solace and insight, I do what historians always do: return to the past. This exercise quickly dispels any nostalgia for a supposedly halcyon golden age of American politics. Perhaps the nastiest presidential election was the first (contested) one, in 1796, between founding fathers and old colleagues, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Most states did not even hold a popular vote for the president, as surrogates from each candidate accused the other of treason and traded vile personal insults through broadsheets — the social media of the day — all while foreign money and influence clouded the campaign. Adams won, but given the electoral college rules of the day, the embittered, defeated candidate, Jefferson, became the vice president. Adams' one term was stained by his party's efforts to muzzle and punish his domestic critics through the Alien and Sedition Act. Vituperative, polarized politics, with candidates and parties trading invectives and accusations of treason, have been more the rule than the exception ever since.

The 1828 election of Gen. Andrew Jackson — the past president Donald Trump is often compared to⁷ — is especially instructive. Arthur Schlesinger's 1944 classic, *The Age of Jackson*, describes a dreary, anxious Washington, DC, after Jackson was elected the seventh president of the United States.⁸ "It was no year for righteous men: Everywhere they sat in darkness." The famed Senator Daniel Webster was deeply worried about the direction in which his country was moving, saying, "Uncertainty about the future

increased the official doom." Jackson was known as domineering, quick to anger and take slight, cruel in battle, and prone to ignore orders and even the law. Completely unlike the Massachusetts and Virginia aristocrats who had preceded him in the presidency, his populist rhetoric and promise to overthrow the 1820s version of the "swamp" or "deep state" terrified many elites. He overturned the political coalitions that had defined the electorate since the founding of the Republic, replaced professional bureaucrats in the government with his friends and cronies through a "spoils system," empowered his "kitchen cabinet" over his formal, legal one, and waged war on a hallowed institution, the Second Bank of the United States, that was seen as the foundation of America's economic health.

How is Jackson remembered? Today, in the shadow of Trump and greater awareness of Jackson's racism and mistreatment of Native Americans, not especially fondly; as a leader, he was "vengeful and self-obsessed."⁹ Throughout much of the 20th century, however, Jackson was far more admired and esteemed than today.¹⁰ Schlesinger portrayed Jackson as a critical figure who expanded and transformed American democracy, while protecting the social and economic interests of the common people against the vested interests of an entrenched elite. Completed a month before the Allied D-Day landing in Europe, Schlesinger's book offered Jackson and the political and intellectual revolution of its time as a model for a world trying to escape the horrors of tyranny and totalitarianism.

Jackson was a hero to New Deal President Franklin Roosevelt. Both were presidents who, like Trump today, inspired intense levels of both adoration and fear and loathing. The FDR we remember is not the one who pursued "America First" economic policies by sabotaging the London Economic Conference in 1933, tried to pack the Supreme Court when it disagreed with him, and violated the long-held norm that no president should serve more than two terms. Instead, we recall a leader who held the nation together during two grave crises, the Great Depression and World War II, and revolutionized American politics.

None of this is to suggest any easy parallels or comparisons to our current world. Jackson was a unique creature of his time and circumstances, just as FDR was and Trump is today. As Schlesinger reminds us, "History can contribute nothing in the way of panaceas." It can, however, caution us against over-confidence in our ability to identify what con-

temporary factors and forces will matter most in the future, while also pushing against romanticizing a fantasy version of the past.

Sorting Out What Really Matters

This is also one of the most important roles of scholarship: helping us sort out what matters most now, to identify what matters in the long run, while avoiding overly romanticizing what came before.

This issue of *Texas National Security Review* offers especially insightful ways to use the past to accomplish these goals: Andrew Forney compares the U.S. Army's deeply troubled performance during the Korean War to better understand the battlefield in Ukraine today; Gokul Sahni chronicles the fascinating history of the relationship between the world's largest democracy, India, and the Soviet Union; and Kathryn Stoner contributes an essay from the roundtable on Sergey Radchenko's magisterial reappraisal of what drove Soviet Cold War grand strategy. Even a piece that deals with the cutting-edge issue of software failures in wars, Jeffrey Ding's "Machine Failing," mines and explores past accidents for better understanding our future. Each of these pieces, in their own way, pulls out from the noise what matters from the past to better instruct us today.

Even — especially — in times of confusion and turbulence, the kind of insightful scholarship offered by the *Texas National Security Review* should provide comfort and insight. 🏰

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Image: *Cliff* (CC BY 2.0)¹¹

4 Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001); *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008).

5 Francis J. Gavin, "Wonder and Worry in an Age of Distraction: Notes on American Exceptionalism for My Young Friends," *War on the Rocks*, July 4, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/wonder-and-worry-in-an-age-of-distraction-notes-on-american-exceptionalism-for-my-young-friends/>. "What Now?" *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2020/21): 4–8, <https://tnsr.org/2021/01/what-now/>.

6 Elisabeth Zerofsky, "Is it Fascism? A Leading Historian Changes His Mind," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 23, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/23/magazine/robert-paxton-facism.html>.

7 Susan B. Glasser, "The Man Who Put Andrew Jackson in Trump's Oval Office," *Politico*, January 22, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/22/andrew-jackson-donald-trump-216493/>.

8 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945).

9 Daniel Feller, "Andrew Jackson: Impact and Legacy," <https://millercenter.org/president/jackson/impact-and-legacy>.

10 Interestingly, Jackson sought and had far better relations with the hated imperial adversary, Great Britain, than either of the presidents that preceded or followed him in the 19th century.

11 For the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Andrew_Jackson_%28282873018869%29.jpg. For the license, see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>.