

Viewpoints

Dreams of returning to the past can take troublesome turns

Top of Utah Voices



Michael Vaughan

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Commentary

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of clothing in your closet that will fit perfectly when you return to the size you were a decade ago? My parents' generation thought that rock music was a passing fad and that the era of the big bands would return. When my own generation first heard rap music in the 1980s, we thought it couldn't last.

The belief that we can, and will, return to the past is generally harmless if confined to the success of sports teams and the popularity of musical genres and clothing styles. It is more troublesome when people extend their desire to return

to the past to the realm of political and social decisions. Nonetheless, the emotion of nostalgia drives many political decisions. Consider presidential elections. In every election since the John F. Kennedy assassination, one or more candidates conjure the memory of Kennedy. In the 1988 election, Kennedy nostalgia crossed over into the Republican party. Vice presidential candidate Dan Quayle compared himself to Kennedy in many of his speeches, until he was taken to task by Sen. Lloyd Bentsen in a televised debate.

Four decades after the Kennedy presidency, the memory of Kennedy still lingers. This is remarkable because more than half of the country's voting-age population was born after Kennedy's death. Nonetheless, the British newspaper the Daily Telegraph has already dubbed Barack Obama the "new Jack Kennedy." There are no indications that Obama is troubled by the comparison.

Among conservatives, Ronald Reagan is an icon among recent presidents. Members of the

conservative media are drawing a comparison between Fred Thompson and Reagan. Again, all indications are that Thompson enjoys being compared to the "Great Communicator."

Candidates can also invoke the mood of a particular time instead of the memory of a particular person. Do you recall the wave of patriotism that swept over the country in the days following the 9/11 attack? American flags were ubiquitous. For a moment, the country was united. The Rudy Giuliani campaign is working to build upon this image of unity and patriotism. You might find it interesting to go to the Giuliani Web site, JoinRudy2008.com, and count the number of references to 9/11. The section of the site where visitors post comments is filled with comments about 9/11 and the feelings associated with the event.

The appeal of nostalgia also filters down to state and local elections. Examine the platforms of candidates running in any state or municipality. If you dig through the rhetoric, you find promises to make the schools and neighborhoods

look like those of 1950s, instead of reflecting the demographics of today. You will find plans to return the economy of the region to the heights reached in 1990, or 1960, or whatever period marked the zenith of economic prosperity for the region. Carefully crafted policies are eschewed for the dream that we can turn back the clock and return to some idyllic vision of the past.

The wisdom of voters basing their decisions on a longing for the past is questionable. The future isn't going to look very much like the past. Our schools and neighborhoods are going to be more diverse. Many people in our community are going to have a native language other than English. We are going to trade with China, India and other countries whose economies are just beginning to blossom. The foundation for our society and economy are not going to be the same.

We need to be looking for leaders who will take us forward instead of backward.

As Yoga Berra said, "The Future Isn't What it Used to Be."

These days, a popular topic of conversation at the gym is the Utah Jazz. The Jazz begin their regular season next week, so it is easy to understand why Utah sports fans are talking about the team. I find it interesting that many of the conversations contain more references to Stockton, Malone and Hornacek than to Okur, Williams and Brewer.

Do you remember Stockton's shot that sent the Jazz to the 1997 Finals? Do you remember the 1998 Finals when Michael Jordan's jump shot broke the heart of Jazz fans? Recalling these memories calls forth a mix of nostalgic and hopeful anticipation. Fans love to reminisce about the glory days of the team. At the same time, many fans believe that it is only a matter of time before the team returns to its rightful place near the top of the NBA.

Recalling pleasant memories is enjoyable. That is why we keep scrapbooks and photo albums. Many people go a step beyond remembering the past and presume that fondly recalled times will once again return. Do you have an item