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Republican Perspective

By John Littig

“Where Have You Gone, Joe DiMaggio?”

What did Paul Simon mean by these words in his song titled “Mrs. Robinson”? He meant that our cultural landscape was changing. He wrote of nostalgia for a bygone era.

Indeed, our culture is changing. Without judging whether various changes are for better or for worse, let's take a peek at just a few of the changes since 1952 (for lack of any more worthy comparison point) when DiMaggio's No. 5 was retired by the Yankees.

Homosexuality: Homosexuality (as it was then called) was considered shameful. In fact, homosexual acts were illegal in most states - including California. No one admitted to it. People were suspicious of Liberace, but he didn't fess up publicly. Now it's fashionable, even celebrated. When NBA player Jason Collins “came out,” it warranted a congratulatory phone call from President Obama and a tweet from the First Lady.

Abortion: Abortion was illegal in California and probably throughout the country. Now it is essentially legal and stigma-free. There are nationwide abortion-advocacy organizations (although they don't call it abortion - it's euphemistically referred to as choice, women's health or reproductive rights). Abortion clinics operate legally and openly, and rarely get into trouble.

Illegitimacy: If a girl got pregnant, she was typically shipped off to stay with her relatives in Iowa for several months, the baby was put up for adoption, the girl returned to school, and the matter was not spoken of openly. Today, the opprobrium is gone; many high schools have daycare centers. While the United States illegitimacy rate varies widely by race, the overall rate (as of October 2012) is 41 percent of live births, compared with 4 percent in 1950.

Smoking: Smoking was the norm. Nonsmokers provided ashtrays for their guests who smoked. Smoking was allowed in restaurants, on airplanes, everywhere. Even DiMaggio smoked in the Yankees' dugout. Cigarette ads were on TV. Today, no smoker can light up in a restaurant, bar, airplane, bus or public building. And no smoker would think to fire up in someone else's home. Smokers are stigmatized, even ostracized. Smoking is no longer cool.

Business dress: Men who had office jobs wore suits and (in major cities like San Francisco) hats. Then along came casual Friday, which has now developed into casual every day. Business wear has become khakis and an open collar.

Sportsmanship: Humility and decorum were the rule. Typical of the athletes of their day, the Joes (DiMaggio and Louis) were self-deprecating. Then along came Cassius ("I am the greatest!") Clay and Jimmy Connors, and a corner had been turned. Now spiking the ball has evolved into ever-more-elaborate end-zone dances and hanging-on-the-rim.

Military service: In the 1950s, nearly every male served. Today, very few do.

Littering: People dropped their trash wherever they happened to be - even threw it from car windows. Roadways, sidewalks, parks, lakes - litter was everywhere. Through awareness campaigns and the threat of fines, this has largely been reversed. There's less litter.

Courtesy: Gentlemen held doors open for ladies, pushed in their chairs and performed various other courtesies. People refrained from interrupting. Now interrupting and "talking over" the other person is the norm on TV. And women now open their own doors - except when they encounter a geezer who hasn't caught on to the modern way.

This litany could go on: racial segregation; fish on Fridays at school cafeterias; the Ozzie and Harriet family model; the Pledge of Allegiance; the father-knows-best concept; the melting pot versus the salad bowl; the change in popular music; government doing business only in English, and so on.

Most readers might agree that less littering is a good thing, and more illegitimacy is a bad thing, while the change in business attire is probably neither. For other cultural changes, different readers will make different value judgments. It's worth thinking about: Is our cultural trajectory for better or for worse?

But the purpose here is not to assign a value assessment to any of these changes. Rather, it is to provide a very limited glimpse of our culture, then and now, and to pose the question: better or worse? We surely have changed. Paul Simon was right; Joe DiMaggio's America is gone.

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