

February 10, 2009

Winter Snowfalls

You would think it would have to be big to cause such headaches and inconveniences but small storms can have numbing impacts. This winter's atmospheric conditions have not precipitated a major snowfall accumulating more than 3 inches in a single storm. There have been 11 of these events since December 1, 2008 and on just 3 occasions the snow had just barely met the threshold of sending the plows out.

The real knockout punch has been the sub-freezing temperatures that have hitchhiked on the back of these snowfalls turning the village into a frozen desert replete with treacherous driving and walking conditions. Our only defense against these ice fields is to continually salt and sand our roads. To date, our Department of Public Works has used 588 tons of rock salt, 590 tons of ice control sand for our streets and parking fields and 9 tons of calcium chloride for village sidewalks. I want to commend our Public Works Department for the great job they have done during this very difficult winter.

I also want to thank our residents who cooperated by removing their vehicles from the streets so that our snowplows can do a more effective job of clearing snow and ice from the streets. Cooperation is sometimes difficult when you are dealing with you own issues of clearing ice and snow from the sidewalks of your own property as well as the hardship of getting your cars safely out of your driveways. So thank you once again for your help.

The season, even with its broth of ice and rain, has its compensations. On the morning of the most recent snowstorm, while negotiating my vehicle over patches of black ice, I turned left on Marcus Avenue toward the North Shore Towers and beheld a magical apparition. In the great silence of a winter white, where sounds are as far off as the sun, the overhung branches of the tree-lined avenue resembled vaulted arches that shimmered like crystalline chandeliers in the languorous morning light. In the sanctuary of that frozen haze, with columns of trees peacefully mantled in the virgin snow, it was hard to believe that the world had ever been green or so achingly beautiful.

Yet the cyclical mysteries of nature are irrevocable and time will again conjure the murmurings of a resurrection as the lines of Swinburne come to life once more: "And frosts are slain and flowers begotten/And in green underwood and cover/Blossom by Blossom the spring begins."

The Stimulus Once More

I don't want to sound like the proverbial broken record, but our village cannot ignore what is happening with the Federal stimulus package. As I've said numerous times in this column, some kind of fiscal stimulus is necessary and that running budget deficits in a recession is probably an unavoidable necessity. In that light, the stage was set for intelligent compromises to be made between the two political parties, but instead the House of Representatives, almost predictably, ran riot by stuffing the stimulus plan with

pet spending projects as if it is some sort of Thanksgiving turkey to sliced up for the ravenous appetites of all sorts of special interests.

The financial health of the United States of America is at stake and these scatterbrained policymakers write a bill that overwhelmingly reflects social policy instead of economic policy. It is as if the House of Reps, in observance of the Beatles 45th anniversary in America, have gone on their own “magical mystery tour” at taxpayers expense with no compunction whatsoever about mortgaging the future of the next generation. It all sadly brings to mind Harold Walpole’s lament that “life is a comedy for those who think and a tragedy for those who feel.”

If creating spending binges for money that does not exist got us into this problem how does doing more of the same get us out of it? As of this writing the Senate seems to have tempered some of the extreme waywardness of their brothers and sisters in the House, but when free booze is flowing, sobriety is a hard found virtue. Printing legal tender untethered to an increase in goods and services is nothing more than fool’s gold. For let us not forget the other side of the coin; with monies flooding the market, inflation (too much money chasing too few goods) now foreshadows the future as an enormously disruptive force.

The only way that spending (providing its short term) will work is if it is lent to others, or if it is invested into the stock market to provide capital for business expansion, or if it is invested in entirely new business, which is the true vehicle for job growth and creation of wealth. To believe that just spending alone is the answer is nothing less than what Harold Ickes once called Kingfish Huey Long’s way of thinking: Halitosis of the intellect.

As consumer spending declines, New York is about to be walloped as eroding tax revenues will result in huge state budget deficits whose powerful aftershocks will shake the upright of this village like never before. If laissez-faire economics is ever to free itself from this financial albatross, fiscal policy needs to shake out the willies that are encouraging risk aversion and undermining confidence to invest and that means the stimulus must include dramatic spending cuts with strategic tax cuts targeted to spur investment and capital accumulation.

Happy 200th Birthday Mr. Lincoln

When I was in grade school we celebrated Lincoln’s Birthday and then a week or so later George Washington’s birthday. Now we have the amorphous, insipid and totally uninspiring “Presidents’ Day”. But no matter how we seek to trivialize what is important there are stories so powerful and essential to our national heritage that they cannot be darkened by an egalitarian imperative to seamlessly bunch everyone together. There is no more conspicuous example of this than our 16th President, Abraham Lincoln.

While George Washington’s achievements, as a soldier/statesman is arguably, if not certainly as great (He was the Revolution, said Lafayette), the story of Lincoln’s poignant beginnings to its shattering climax at Ford’s Theatre inspires and touches the heart like no other. His martyrdom (on Good Friday no less) at the moment of victory assured his swift and meteoric apotheosis. As his story was posthumously fleshed out, his struggles against poverty and illiteracy to his rise in the law, politics and then the Presidency itself has miraculous qualities which, in the words of one of his myriad biographers, David Herbert

Donald, allowed Lincoln to become the collective wish fulfillment of the American people.

Extraordinarily complex and intelligent, his personality cast enough shadows to fill a haunted house and enough mystery to bedevil scholars and historians about the essence of his peculiar genius and greatness. Innately shrewd and calculating but unassailably principled, brooding and melancholic (he suffered one, very likely two nervous breakdowns by the time he was 33) his burdened spirit was leavened with an acute sense of the human comedy, ferociously ambitious he single-mindedly subordinated everything to his commitment to the democratic experiment whose cause was championed and graced by his remarkable gift for literary expression. All of these qualities came together as President where he both governed over and pondered about the tragic paradoxes of a nation at war with itself.

There is, in retrospect, a tendency to romanticize the American Civil War of which he was the principle figure, but this is folly. The Civil War was a catastrophic event of unprecedented proportions that happened because America failed to do what it does best: compromise. This has led some detractors of Lincoln to argue that slavery in the South would have died a peaceful death but instead it led to a war that cost tens of trillions in today's dollars, killed off 2% of the population (some 6 million in today's numbers) and scarred the psyche of a nation for more than a century.

But by the year 1860, when Lincoln was elected, slavery was never about the South --- it was about the vast West that now belonged to the United States but was still undeveloped territories and not yet the states we know today. The South, feeling exiled by expansion, was determined to spread the institution of slavery to these lands whereas Lincoln was equally determined to restrict the detestable practice where it already existed --- the South. This was the primary cause of the South seceding and Lincoln prosecuting the war, which became a total war waged upon the Confederacy to save the Union, which in his words "was the last best hope of earth."

This ultimately evolved, as much for military as idealistic reasons, as a war to end slavery. Out of this crucible of Civil War, Lincoln gave a higher meaning to the terrible carnage in prose that for its severity, as much as for its richness, will endure as long as the nation itself. In saving the Union and securing 'a new birth of freedom' Lincoln deserves to be remembered and revered, as does Washington, for their heroic testimony that individuals can make a critical difference in the life of a nation as well as to reflect upon the human cost to create and then preserve this Republic.

Their examples are worth a couple of days of a nation's grateful remembrance.