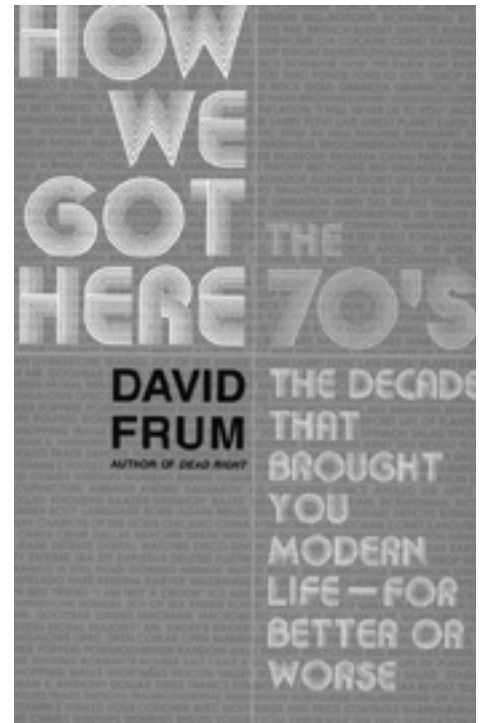


HOW WE GOT HERE: THE 70'S.

Book review

David Frum *How We Got Here: The 70's: The Decade that Brought You Modern Life—For Better or For Worse.* (Toronto: Random House Canada; 2000) pp. xxiv + 419 pages, hardcover, ISBN 0-679-30966-7

James Allan Evans



Ah, the seventies! According to my calculations, David Frum was only ten years old when they started, but he is a qualified post-NAFTA observer, having spent his boyhood in Toronto and his university years at Yale and Harvard. The war in Vietnam ended in the 1970s with an undignified American exit. While it lasted, it brought Canada a string of Vietnam refugees, and refugee partners or mothers, including Diane Francis and Jane Jacobs, and founded the only industry which has continued to flourish in British Columbia under the present NDP regime: marijuana production. In 1976, Tom Symons, a former president of Trent University who had been commissioned by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada to respond to the complaint that Canadians suffered from discrimina-

tion in faculty hiring, produced a well-footnoted report which concluded that they did. There followed a brief bout of academic breast-beating, but the Canadians are not a recognized victim group and in any case, the attention span in the Groves of Academe is short. The Symons Report generated no “rights” and was soon forgotten. The péquiste government of René Lévesque was elected, and Quebec’s first referendum closed the decade in 1980. The Canadian dollar started its downward slide. In Ontario, the Hall-Dennis Report modernized education, and in the process gutted the schools: Before Hall-Dennis, a graduate of the Ontario Grade 13 could enter sophomore year at the University of British Columbia, while soon after it he (or she) could barely qualify for first-year entrance.

It was a period when experts created problems for the best reasons, and then established programs to repair them. For instance: dyslexia, which baffled educationists. “Dyslexia” does not refer to tiresome rhetoric, as its Greek roots imply, but rather the inability to read. Parents noticed that some of their offspring, who had been taught reading according to the most up-to-date methods, could not read at all. *Weekend Magazine*, which was still published in the seventies, printed a story of a dyslexic teenager who hanged himself in despair. Circa 1978, I attended a meeting of the Vancouver Association for Learning Disabilities where the speaker was a former dyslexic who had overcome her learning disability and now ran a private institute which taught dyslexics to read. A concerned mother asked a question. Was

dyslexia a modern ailment? What caused it? Air pollution? Too much TV? Lead poisoning from the water pipes? Why had no one mentioned this malady when she went to school?

The reason, the speaker replied, was that the method she used to teach dyslexics to read was the method by which, once upon a time, everyone was taught to read. Thus the schools used to produce fast readers and slow readers, but, slow or fast, everyone mastered reading. But with up-to-date approaches, the “slow readers” that obsolete teaching methods produced, became victims of a Learning Disability.

So much for the seventies in Canada. In the United States, however, future global trends were being born, and David Frum has written a lively book about it, full of much rant and right-wing angst—and some substance. Frum is the son of the late Barbara Frum, a Canadian who now lives in Washington, a contributing editor of the Rupert Murdoch’s *Weekly Standard*, a columnist for the *National Post*, and, despite his youth, a conservative in politics in a period when conservatives have redefined themselves as followers of Thomas Jefferson, believing that the least government is the best government, while the left yearns for social engineering.

Frum has zeroed in on the 1970s, the decade (as he sees it) which formed the American mindset at the start of the twenty-first century. Before the seventies began, Americans went to church in great numbers, and opted for the traditional denominations. They were oddly patriotic—even nationalistic—from the viewpoint of Canadians who were not used to so much bunting or hands held over the heart when the flag paraded by. Their republic had never known defeat, and they were convinced of its morality and generosity. Most believed they entered World War II out of an altruistic impulse to help Britain and the Commonwealth, though there was a paranoid cadre who imagined that Britain had inveigled the United States

into the conflict. Only unbelieving Canadians thought the reason was that American territory was attacked at Pearl Harbour and that Japan’s allies, Germany and Italy, declared war on the United States. But in the 1970s the faith of the United States was shaken.

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The war in Vietnam ended. By spring, 1972, only 92,000 Americans were left there, down from a half million when Nixon became president, and at the end of March, North Vietnam struck. With US air support, the South Vietnamese army drove back the North Vietnamese. In January, 1973, Henry Kissinger initialed a US-North Vietnamese peace accord, and promised the South that it could rely on US air power to help, if North Vietnam attacked again. Congress ignored the promise and chopped military aid. Without petroleum the South Vietnamese airplanes could not fly and the army ran short of

ammunition. There is some irony to the fact that it was Sen. Edward Kennedy, whose brother as president had entered the Vietnam quagmire in the first place, who mobilized a Senate vote forbidding the Pentagon apply money left over from 1972 and 1973 appropriations to assist South Vietnam. To give South Vietnam money “would perpetuate involvement that should have ended long ago.” The North struck again in late 1974, the South collapsed, and at the end of April 1975, the last Americans left their allies behind and made a swift exit from Saigon.

Frum thinks the retreat was a mistake as Talleyrand defined mistakes: that is, worse than a mere sin. But he is too young—or too comfortable—a critic to analyse the trauma that Vietnam inflicted. Hitherto, Americans had won all their wars; even the War of 1812 had produced a nice victory at New Orleans. Vietnam was different. It was a clear defeat, and the response was peculiarly American. In World War I, Canada which had a population of less than nine million, lost more soldiers in four years than the United States did in Vietnam, and on the other side of the globe, Australia which sent men to fight in Vietnam alongside the Americans, suffered more casualties in proportion to the size of its population and emerged from the defeat without the scars which the United States suffered. Even now, 25 years on, the United States shrugs off the idea of compensation for the ecological damage it caused with Agent Orange, for compensation sounds like reparations, and reparations are what vanquished enemies pay. If Vietnam were to apologize to the United States for the defeat, it might be worth half a billion dollars in aid. Of course, Frum does not follow that line of reasoning.

The angst-driven presidency of Jimmy Carter closed off the decade. Symptomatic of the reaction against the strident anti-communism of the fifties and sixties was an order

from the Massachusetts Supreme Court that Alger Hiss be readmitted to the bar. All decent people thought him an innocent victim of Nixon's McCarthyist phase—until the Soviet KGB files were opened after the Cold War, and the charge of spying turned out to be true after all.

The fashionable perils that alarmed the media were overpopulation and Global Cooling. Paul Ehrlich revived the Malthusian thesis in his *The Population Bomb* (1968) which promised famine in the 1970s as millions starved to death, and the United States abandoned countries such as India and Egypt to sink under the weight of excess humanity. Domsday scenarios infected Hollywood, and President Carter commissioned a report; when it appeared, under the title *Global 2000*, it was a counsel of despair. Stephen Schneider's *The Genesis Strategy* in 1976 predicted that falling temperatures would cause major crop failures by the decade's end. Then, in 1977, the American Geophysical Union introduced Global Warming. President Carter set up an Office of Carbon Dioxide Environmental Effects, and Stephen Schneider metamorphosed into a global warming guru. Armageddon remained a certainty; the question was whether to face it in our long johns or our Tilley shorts.

Judicial activism heated up. David Frum on the American experience with activist judges in the seventies should be read with attention by Canadians, for before the Canadian Bill of Rights, there was nothing similar in Canada. Judicial activism was so foreign to Canadian legal tradition that until the middle of the last century, appeals from the Canadian Supreme Court could be made to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, an august, rather fusty body which Tony Blair has only recently abolished. Once upon a time, its elegant judgements had a bracing effect on the Canadian legal establishment. But the pendulum has swung towards judicial activism, and the

example of the United States is not reassuring. Activist courts had a profound effect on American society in the seventies, and proved Lord Acton's maxim that "Power corrupts, etc." Canadian judges who lack even the minimal checks on their power that American judges have, will no doubt prove Acton right once again.

The turning-point in the United States, according to Frum, was *Goldberg vs. Kelly* in 1970. New York wanted to deny welfare to one of the plaintiffs,

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Juan De Jesus, alleging that he was a drug addict. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan ruled that New York must hold a formal hearing to demonstrate that De Jesus was a drug addict before they could refuse him his welfare cheque. The Fifth Amendment guaranteed him the right to due process. The ruling seemed not unfair in theory, but it meant that every case of welfare fraud had to be litigated. *Goldberg vs. Kelly* contributed to New York City's 1975 fiscal crash.

Soon *Goss vs. Lopez* (1975) ruled that public school students could not be suspended for disciplinary reasons. *Board of Curators vs. Horowitz* did not rule that a medical student had the right to a hearing before being flunked out, but by only one vote in the Supreme Court. *O'Connor vs. Donaldson* (1975) released the mentally ill to the streets. The best example of

judicial muscle was the ordering of school busing to enforce integration. Frum cites the case of Boston, where school busing was enforced by Judge W. Arthur Garrity, Jr. Busing lacked grass-roots support among either the white or black community, but Garrity pushed forward with the sensitivity of a *Gauleiter*. No one could fault his ultimate aim, which was to erase a regime of asymmetrical rights that had victimized blacks, but the pupils who were bused became only units on a drawing board. Their welfare was subordinate to the grand design. Yet the proof of the cake is in the eating, and busing in Boston has to be judged by the same yardstick as cakes.

Frum makes the telling point that Garrity's own children were not bused. Nor were the children of Michael Dukakis, Edward Kennedy, or George McGovern—in fact, the chief proponents of busing made certain their own children were not affected. Like Gilbert and Sullivan's Duke of Plaza Toro, who led his army from the rear, they saw to it that the policies they supported did not inconvenience them or their families. Frum points out that the Duke's philosophy was also prevalent in the Vietnam war, where the generals stayed out of harm's way, in contrast to World War II. He is not quite right: US General Mark Clark on the Italian front in WW II was as good a Plaza Toro as any modern general. Sir Isaac Brock who led the York volunteers up Queenston Heights in the War of 1812 belonged to an obsolete style where leaders led by example as well as by fiat and ukases. Brock's reward was a bullet in his chest and even as early as 1812, most leaders preferred to keep themselves intact.

An era ended in the seventies: For me, Charles Lindbergh's death in same year that Americans fled from Vietnam is a significant turning-point. Frum, however, does more than preach doom about the new era that began then (his final "Part" is titled "Regeneration"), and *How We Got Here* makes lively reading. In fact, what is

impressive about the American experience is how well the checks and balances work in American society, which makes errors, but puts its problems behind it and moves on, in a way that Canada cannot. The Fifth Amendment which saved Juan De Jesus' welfare cheque also ensures due process for everyone, whereas in Canada, due process in the courts depends on the disposition of the judge, and Human Rights tribunals are free to disregard it. Judges are patronage appointments and their performance is not subject to any periodic review. The checks in the US Constitution which can lead to government stalemate also prevent the development of an all-powerful prime minister's office, or even more omnipotent premiers in the provinces. I would like to see a counterpart of *How We Got Here* for Canada, with an appendix titled "Where We Are Going." I would expect to disagree with some of it, but I would read it with attention.

This book has two great drawbacks. One is that Frum sounds middle-aged before his time: He looks at the seventies with a pervasive sense of disapproval. The other is the straight-jacket that he has made for it. Why isolate the seventies, interesting though the decade is? Did Frum start collecting newspaper clippings at the age of ten and run out of storage space by the time he reached his majority? The sixties flowed seamlessly into the seventies, and when twenty-first century historians look backwards, they will find the eighties and nineties more seminal. These were the decades of Thatcherism and Reaganism. The Cold War ended and a crop of tribal and ethnic wars took its place. Resurgent capitalism widened the gap between the rich and the poor, and the Internet increased the gulf between the articulate and the inarticulate classes. Multiculturalism became generally accepted, and the new aristocracy of wealth is no respecter of skin

colour. The "isms" of the seventies became either unfashionable or mature. One remained intractable: ageism, which grows more significant as more people ignore the average life spans approved by Social Security actuaries, the Canada Pension Plan and the New Testament. Frum is an impressionist social historian, dealing lightly with developments which a professional sociologist would envelop in leaden prose. Perhaps I should expect no weighty conclusions. But I find it easy enough to agree with his general thesis, so far as I can understand it, namely that a number of events took place in the seventies, and they are worth a book.

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Master at work

I had to admire the way in which Bill Clinton, a master of television, worked the room at the 1994 NATO summit in Brussels. He delayed his entry until all the other fifteen leaders were at their seats in the circular chamber. (This meant winning a game of chicken with the *protocolaire* François Mitterrand. As a president of much longer standing, Mitterrand liked to exercise the right of coming in last.) It took Clinton seven and a half minutes to get from the door to his seat. He slowly circumnavigated the chamber,

pausing to greet each leader in turn and engage in thirty seconds of animated conversation. His head was perfectly angled for the television crews tracing him from inside the doughnut of the round table. It was a personal gift to each NATO head. In fifteen nations the evening newscasts would show their leader deeply engaged with the President of the United States. And US television would have the President as the centrepiece of the event.

John Major, *The Autobiography*

No special help

Recently ... the widespread need for more home care has led to the proposal that we provide special funding for it. We should not. The effect would soon be to over-expand home care relative to other health services, to waste money by distorting the allocation of resources. It would be inequitable as well as inefficient, because the extent to which home care is more needed than better community facilities, for example, varies among areas and among provinces. Such priorities are matters for management within each provincial program. Special federal funding of bits and pieces of medicare would be neither efficient nor fair. Our partnership role is to support the program as a whole.

Tom Kent, *What should be done about Medicare*, Caledon Institute, August 2000

Picture of discipline: Federal net debt, 1993-2000

