

**THINKING LONG TERM AT THE NEW YEAR**

In the policy world, elected officials often consider anything more than one year long term. Charles Rangel (D-NY), chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, likes to quip "I don't buy green bananas" when asked to comment on policies for 2010 or beyond. But consider the other end of the spectrum. Orthodox history traces civilization itself back only 5,000 or 6,000 years (e.g., Sumer, Persia, China, Egypt); even 3,000 years ago, few people led what we'd call civilized lives, despite the beginnings of kingships under King David or the Zhou dynasty in China or the advances of the Mayan civilization. From this perspective, most of us alive today will live through 1 percent or more of civilization. And while each year's changes may seem small or marginal, they compound profoundly over a lifetime.

When considering policy, it's probably most useful to think in neither 1-year nor 6,000-year increments, but in terms of the lifetime of someone born today, perhaps your children or grandchildren. If these children live through another 1 percent of civilization—or 60 years or more—what type of society and government will we bequeath them?

Consider the recent pace of change. In 1770, few could have predicted the forthcoming rebirth of democracy, revolution, and growth of the middle classes. By 1830, the Industrial Revolution had moved into full swing, bringing with it the first inklings of just how far economies of scale in production and modern war could go. Between 1890 and 1950, small governments grew into large ones; automobiles, airplanes, and armaments became produced in mass; vast populations left the countryside for cities; and engineering transformed work, play, and home, while world wars and mass genocides made this the most destructive period in history. From 1950 to today, economies morphed from goods-producing to service-providing, the world's last empire collapsed, health care and health insurance swelled to among the largest of all economic sectors, government social welfare policy introduced new protections and new dependencies within almost every family, and computers, televised communication, and air conditioning transformed where and how we lived. And, of course, there's globalization—an engine of extraordinary change, however you measure or define it.

How quickly modern economic and social forces drive change over even a single lifetime, however, can be contrasted with the Achilles' heel of today's most intense political battles: often, the most intense are the least important. Like Rangel's yellow bananas, few have long-lasting implications. Or, to mix my metaphors, even when the modern Achilles does engage in a meaningful political battle, he often slips on Rangel's banana peel. Oh, sure, I am as ready as the next person to worry about next year's potential expansion of the alternative minimum tax to the middle class or to rail against the abuses of earmarks in legislation. And, for over 20 years I've witnessed first hand many pitched battles over whether the top income tax rate should be 33 percent, 40 percent, or somewhere in between. Yet, even without a crystal ball, we know that much bigger issues loom.

The noise surrounding the less meaningful, but vociferous, short-term debates can easily crowd out the more important, and more interesting, long-term challenges. Should social welfare policy continue to provide just one more protection against one more risk, or should it reorient itself toward improving opportunities that include additional risks? Should government policies continue to encourage the elderly and near-elderly to spend more of their adult lives out of the labor force, or should they begin to tap into seniors' extraordinary talents? Should health care continue to favor acute care over preventive care or chronic care over cures? Should educational policy continue to reinforce a design built around a farm-sector economy, or should it flex to meet the needs of each student, start rewarding well the best of our teachers, and measure each student's individual progress along the way? In our relations with other peoples and nations, will more military muscle continue to be our main recourse, or would more foreign assistance, diplomacy, and cooperative ventures better serve U.S. interests?

Policymaking for the long term requires a grasp of history, a sense of the common good, and a willingness to learn. The payoff is huge: a better future for the next generations, not simply some easy political victory next year for my side or yours. A good time to start thinking ahead and acting accordingly is now, as the bell of a new year and a new political season tolls.

Happy New Year!