

Guest Column to The News-Star
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What will the next 50 years bring?

I read, with great interest, a USA Today insert placed in the News-Star on Sunday, September 16, 2018. This special section focused on the year 1968. Subjects included civil rights, politics, sports, gender equality, women’s rights, war, fashion, hippies, music, television, media, movies, and technology. The memorable and educational piece included articles and mentions about key moments in America during that historic year.

McDonalds started selling the Big Mac. *Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood* made its television debut. The Apollo 7 astronauts successfully orbited the earth. Astronauts in the movie “2001: A Space Odyssey” used a news pad that looks like the Samsung Galaxy Tablet and Apple iPad that wasn’t released until 2010.

In this column, I’d like to lift out a few of the topics covered in that special section and talk about their relevance today; and, perhaps, 50 years from today.

In January 1968, Cleveland (OH) Mayor Carl Stokes and Gary (IN) Mayor Richard Hatcher both took office as the first African-Americans to be elected mayors of major U.S. cities. In November of 1968, Shirley Chisholm was the first African-American woman elected to Congress, representing New York’s 12th District. Monroe’s first African-American Mayor was elected in 1996.

In 2001, I had the honor of being the second African-American Mayor elected to lead the City of Monroe. As Mayor, my team has supported progressive projects like a new airport terminal, public safety center, and those listed in our 60 for 60 project list, because we understand that we must invest in, and improve upon, things today – that will benefit our residents 50 years from now.

In 2018, the sight of an African-American Mayor is no longer a rare thing. In 2017, more than 470 African-American mayors were leading cities, towns or villages across the country. When the 115th Congress took office in January 2017, it included a historic number of Hispanics, African-Americans, Asian-Americans and women of color. Progress has truly been made. However, there is still room to improve in terms of more diversity in political sectors - such as having more minorities and women the U.S. Senate.

Another reflection in that special insert talked about “Radical Women” finding their voice and fighting for women’s rights. Thankfully, today, women serve in all realms of government, education, and business. Much has improved over the past 50 years. However, despite being more than 50% of the U.S. workforce, overall women earn only 82-cents for every dollar earned by males. We should all proudly support progressive movements that will allow our sisters, daughters, wives and ALL women to receive equal opportunities and earn equal pay.

In April of 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Just two months later, in June of 1968, U.S. Senator and Presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. In this historic year, two of the nation’s most progressive-minded, and sometimes polarizing, figures were murdered. Dr. King was an influential leader who gave hope to people stuck under the boot of Jim Crow laws. He risked everything to be a drum major for justice, equality, and equity. RFK had growing support among blacks, working-class whites, farmers, and Hispanic voters. He risked everything hoping to be able to truly unite our country. Many Americans felt despair after their untimely deaths.

One columnist, Gwen Ullman wrote, *“I often wonder how the course of American history might have changed had King not been cut down before the age of 40, or had Bobby Kennedy not been assassinated a few months later. Would he have found a way to bring the nation together in racial harmony?”*

We will never know the answer to those questions. However, 50 years later, we live in a more diverse country, where despite tremendous progress, we still have many hurdles and challenges to overcome as it relates to racial harmony. But, we still have hope and opportunity. Hope, because of the progress that has been made; and, because of the progressive and inclusive mindset of those within Generation X, Y/Millennials, and the generation yet to be named. For those in my generation (Baby Boomers), it is our job to share our time, talent, and wisdom to help make this dream a reality. It should not take another 50 years.

In closing, I saw an iconic picture of the starting lineup for the 1968 St. Louis Cardinals Major League Baseball team as a true example of the phrase, *“A picture is worth a thousand words!”* The collection of white, black, and Latino stars learned to respect one another and work toward a common goal. Their team easily won the National League pennant and went on to play in the 1968 World Series. Even though this group of players represented multiple ethnicities, they understood what it took to become one team.

E pluribus unum (Out of many, one). This is the motto of the United States. What will the next 50 years bring? If we remember and learn from the past...If we support diversity and progress...If we learn to respect one another and work toward common goals – the next 50 years will produce advancements and achievements that we can all be proud of. By working together, we can, and will, bring forth the change we aspire to see in this world.