

THE FIRST MEASURED CENTURY

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Lucky you; this is not about Florida, not directly.

Thanksgiving 2000 is history. The real beginning of the new century, Jan. 1, 2001, is coming fast upon us. It's been a year since the odometer came up with all those zeroes, yielding a surge of interest in American history. But all we heard about on television or in other media were stories, what social scientists call "anecdotes." For example: Lindburgh, Titanic, D-Day, Hiroshima, FDR, Ronald Reagan, Elvis, O.J., Monica.

But there is another lens through which to see American history, probably a better one: through data that measures what has happened to everyday people within societies. We measure more, we measure better, we measure that which has never been measured before. This is the first measured century. America is the most measured country. We ought to take a look.

I am the host-essayist of a soon-to-be-aired PBS special and co-author of a recently published reference book (AEI Press) both entitled "The First Measured Century." I have spent much of the last few years examining century-long American trends. The numbers have made me think and link in ways that I had not before.

It is clear that America moved ahead along a jagged but clearly ascendant line. The life expectancy of newborn infants is 50 percent longer than in 1900. Adults at age 60 live five years longer (about 30

percent longer) than they did in 1950. Most everyone has television, phone service, a vehicle, and, in the hot states, air conditioning. Much of that is true in all the developed countries. But the first measured century shows that Americans are, in very many ways, unique. Why? Does the pudding have a theme? It does for me. I stare at the data, and they yell at me, "It's liberty, for good or for ill."

Think of all words and phrases that conjure up the American 20th century: Free land, free immigration, free politics, free trade, freedom now, free markets, wars for liberty, sexual liberation, free-standing homes, deregulation, and so on and so on.

The historian cum sociologist Frederick Jackson Turner used 1890 census data to show that the "American frontier had closed," although free homestead land was given out until the 1930s. But Americans quickly opened up a new frontier: the suburbs. In 1910, about 12 percent of Americans lived in the suburbs.

Today that rate is 52 percent. We are the only suburban nation. Thanks in some large measure to unique mortgage policies, more than two-thirds of us own our own dwellings. Most of these are detached single-family houses, just the kind that snotty critics like to categorize as "suburban sprawl." But have you ever heard someone say "a man's apartment is his castle?"

I am asked these days: What has been the single most important trend in American life in the 20th century? Immigration. From 1880 to 1930, on a base population of 50 million, America took in 28 million immigrants! They came for jobs, and they came for liberty. Many elite social

scientists of the time believed that these Italian, Jewish and Polish newcomers were biologically inferior beings. The new I.Q. tests categorized them as imbeciles, near-imbeciles and morons. Eugenic theory helped slam shut the doors of immigration in the 1920s, but such pseudo-science is in the trash can now. In 1965, Americans reopened the immigration flow, this time allowing persons from around the world to share and shape our liberty.

The political system opened up. Women were enfranchised. The South was desegregated, and African-Americans in the South became a powerful voting force, as we have just seen in Florida. The advent of primaries let Americans choose the candidates whom they would consider for leadership. The public opinion poll lets politicians know what's bugging the voters.

Radio and television came along. In most countries, most citizens received monochromatic government broadcasts. In America, we got a full menu of private views and values.

Until a few decades ago, fewer than 10 percent of Americans owned stock. Now, more than half of the population does, owning the means of production. Damn near the whole economy has been deregulated in the past two decades, making it easier for Americans to set up shop on their own. Adult education systems allow those who missed the boat to climb aboard.

We fought our wars for liberty, and won. Around the world unfree nations seek free politics and free markets.

Some conservatives think personal liberty

may have gone too far. They look at rising crime rates, out-of-wedlock births, welfare. They have a point, but in recent decades, the trends have started to move in a healthier direction.

And, finally, consider another hallmark of liberty: the litigation boom. We sue ourselves crazy; witness Florida. But that will be straightened out soon, and we will go on expanding our liberties. Have a good century.

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