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 pgaddis@floridaweekly.com

**Executive Editor**

Jeffrey Cull  
 jcull@floridaweekly.com

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Jim Dickerson  
 jdickerson@floridaweekly.com

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**Circulation Manager**

Penny Kennedy  
 pkennedy@floridaweekly.com

**Circulation**

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**Account Executives**

Shelley Lund  
 slund@floridaweekly.com

Doug Rosburg  
 drosburg@floridaweekly.com

Allison Spencer  
 aspencer@floridaweekly.com

Michelle Harrison  
 mharrison@floridaweekly.com

**Business Office Manager**

Kelli Carico

**Street Address:**

Florida Weekly  
 4300 Ford Street, Suite 106  
 Fort Myers, Florida 33916  
 Phone 239.333.2135  
 Fax: 239.333.2140



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# OPINION

## Buck up, America — we've seen worse

BY RICH LOWRY

How sour is the public mood? An NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll found about half of people believe 2008 was one of the worst years in American history. At times, Abraham Lincoln's lament has seemed apt, "We live in the midst of alarms; anxiety beclouds the future; we expect some new disaster with each newspaper we read."

But some perspective, please. Even a steep recession doesn't compare with the events that have made for America's worst years. To wit:

1837: In a real-estate bubble, people borrowed paper money to speculate in Western land. According to John Steele Gordon's book "An Empire of Wealth," land sales by the federal government were \$2.5 million in 1832 and \$25 million by 1836. President Andrew Jackson determined to prick the bubble by accepting only gold or silver as payment and succeeded all too well. Banks failed, Wall Street crashed, the price of cotton fell by half and 90 percent of the country's factories closed. "The country suffered," Gordon writes, "the longest economic depression in the nation's history. It didn't reach bottom until February 1843, fully seventy-two

months after it began."

1862: Any year of the Civil War qualifies as one of the country's worst, but in June 1862, Robert E. Lee took command of the Confederate army defending Richmond, Va., and pushed back the Union army. At Fredericksburg at the end of the year, Gen. Burnside hurled his Union troops at Marye's Heights, although warned that doing so would constitute "murder, not warfare." The Union lost more than 12,000 men. England seemed close to recognizing the Confederacy, and state and congressional elections went poorly for Lincoln's Republicans. "If there is a worse place than hell," President Lincoln said, "I am in it."

1940: The economy was still limping, with unemployment at 14.6 percent (it had hit 19 percent in 1938 during "the depression within the depression"). Adolf Hitler marched into the Netherlands, Belgium and France, overrunning them in weeks. The American public was divided about how to respond, and the country's defenses were unprepared. The army had fewer soldiers than Yugoslavia, and troops often had to train using broomsticks. Western democracy seemed on the verge of eclipse.

1968: Assassinations, urban riots,

a losing war in Vietnam -- it was the year of the great American nervous break-down.

Of course, the country persevered:

- The economy recovered from the depression of 1837, and six decades after the adoption of the Constitution, Gordon notes, had "expanded by a factor of eighteen or more."

- In U.S. Grant, Lincoln finally found his general to match Lee.

- We rearmed, and defeated the Axis, as the economy shook free of the Great Depression for good.

- The aftershocks of 1968 reverberate still, but in the 1980s the country entered a long period of prosperity and defeated the Soviet Union.

"We have overcome some grim, frightful times," says best-selling presidential historian Jay Winik. "With inspired leadership, with the American spirit and ingenuity, and with an open political system that resolves conflicts through debate rather than violence, we've always been able to restore the country to dynamism and health." And surely will again, as 2008 fades into the past. ■

*Rich Lowry is editor of the National Review.*

## GUEST OPINION

# Withdrawal from Iraq?



A new year dawns with yet another sign of how much the news business has changed during the half-century that your reporter has been a part of it: As *The New York Times* reported this past week, the "Big Three" television news networks have stopped sending full-time correspondents to Iraq. That's the same Iraq where more than 130,000 U.S. troops still stand in harm's way.

Your reporter remembers a time, not so very long ago, when the major television news divisions maintained full-time, fully staffed bureaus in cities such as Paris, Jakarta, Cairo and Beirut, along with numerous other datelines around the world. Important events haven't stopped happening in these places, but, starting in the 1980s, television and print news organizations began to shutter these foreign bureaus in order to cut costs.

A small handful of remaining outposts such as London, Tel Aviv and Beijing have been left to pick up the slack. Correspondents based in these cities are often responsible for covering news thousands of miles away, sometimes on other continents. So

when big news breaks — an earthquake, a tsunami, a war — the reporters and their crews can "parachute in" to cover the story. But the absence of a long-term, consistent journalistic presence in entire regions of the globe means that coverage of breaking news too often lacks the context and depth needed to truly understand events as they develop. As a result, American news consumers may get the "who," the "what" and the "where" of a story but can be left wholly in the dark about the "how" and the "why."

In news stories that hinge on political developments abroad, this means U.S. citizens can be left woefully unaware of a situation until it becomes a full-blown crisis; in stories that center on natural disasters, it means that we don't have a meaningful framework for understanding how an event (and a government's response) will impact a nation and a region in the near and long term.

For a representative democracy that, however challenged at the moment, remains the world's sole economic and military superpower, this is a serious problem. If We the People want an American foreign policy that is both responsive to public opinion and effective, We the People need to be kept abreast of what's going on in the world on a regular basis instead of just cramming on the history and culture of foreign locales (as journal-

ists and news consumers alike are now forced to do) when something big happens.

When, for example, a devastating earthquake hits Pakistan, Americans should be aware right away — not weeks later — what the implications could be for a government that possesses nuclear weapons and a tenuous hold on power. When places like Iraq or Iran become the subject of international tensions, We the People need to know the history of U.S. relations with these countries, or risk relying solely on official pronouncements made with specific policy aims in mind.

Coming up on six years since the U.S. invasion, Iraq is still a deadly place for Americans in uniform. Yes, the situation and the story there have changed over time, with political maneuvers beginning to overtake military maneuvers in prominence. These kinds of stories can be more challenging to report, particularly for television news, with its reliance on pictures. But that doesn't mean that they do not merit reporting in a daily, sustained way. Not when so many lives have been lost in the Iraqi experiment, not when so many billions have been spent in a strategically vital and volatile region. And not, perhaps most of all, when We the People still have tens of thousands of our countrymen and women serving there. ■