

Reminiscences of the Starbucks in Little Falls Mall

As I slipped into retirement in 1998 Starbucks to me was just a place to buy a cup of coffee. The second edition of my book on the Oracle financials software had come out. My business partner had followed his heart to the West Coast, chasing a new romance. The employees who were left in Bethesda didn't appreciate the fact that I was bringing in more revenue than anybody else. What they saw was that I spent a fair amount of my time sitting in my office writing. In any case, my company was not a happy place to be. My family had more than enough money, so I gladly shut the company down and went on to new things.

There was so much that I wanted to do! I started to write a book on investment opportunities that I saw at that time. I anticipated in ways what is happening today: the Uber and Lyft timeshare car sharing projects, self-driving cars, and other innovations. Unfortunately, I was far enough off the mark on the technology that I would not have made any money at them. But it was an interesting year's effort to investigate. And, I had free time for a cup or two of coffee during the day.

I dabbled in other pursuits. I spent five summers as a volunteer for Habitat for Humanity in Latin America and Portugal. I worked as a substitute teacher, and then spent the school year 2000 to 2003 as a regular classroom teacher. I started a PhD program in statistics at the University of Maryland. Nevertheless, I had quite a bit of time, and I looked for interesting company with whom to spend it. That brought me to the Starbucks café in Sumner Place, Bethesda, MD.

This Starbucks must be the prototype Howard Schultz had in mind in founding Starbucks. It is reminiscent of the coffee shops in Berkeley of my youth – the Mediterranean, the Forum, and Peet's Coffee. It is a place for intellectuals to gather and while away the hours in conversation.

Most Starbucks could not be like this, but the fact that they aspire to do so is part of the allure. It elevates people a bit above their quotidian reality. Starbucks has a living room atmosphere that encourages conversation. At Sumner Place that conversation was extraordinarily rich.

Different people came every day. A lot of them had things to do in their lives, not everybody could make it regularly. There was no formal power, but

usually between 10 and 11 people drifted in. It was comfortable enough that the first person to arrive did not have to fear being alone for long.

The grand old man of the group was Hayden Estey, born in 1913. We knew that he was retired CIA. Being a good spook, he did not let on to much more. We knew that he had been a soldier in World War II, at the Battle of the Bulge among other places. The Holocaust Memorial has posted an oral interview of his recollections of Malthausen.

Hayden's career prior to his service with the CIA was something he was willing to talk about. Born in 1913, he graduated from Harvard with the class of 1936. He was a true Massachusetts blue-blood. He could trace the Estey family back to 11th century Italy. The rest of his lineage was pretty much English. Harvard appears to have come to him as a birthright. He was tall and patrician. He was surprisingly liberal in his social attitudes, rather like a Roosevelt who could afford to diverge from the traditions of his social class and upbringing.

Hayden reported for U. S. News in France during the late 1930s. He was spirited over the Spanish border by his Jewish girlfriend one step ahead of the Nazis. His Harvard ROTC instructor snapped him up, and he was soon serving as a communications specialist in George Marshall's temporary buildings on the Washington mall, prior to the construction of the Pentagon. This prewar staff was a tight, elite group. Hayden briefed Roosevelt upon occasion, Truman rather frequently. His private opinions of these people, especially Truman, could be colorful. He was not happy with Truman's treatment of the military.

Hayden disliked being trapped in Washington when the war was going on elsewhere. He went to Ft. Polk, Louisiana, as an aide to Gen. Brooks of the 11th Armored, preparing for service in Europe where he served as a captain and lieutenant colonel. They deployed a bit late for D-Day, but he did see service in the Battle of the Bulge, for which he received a bronze star.

For us, his career went dark at the end of the war. He simply didn't talk about it. When he died in 2004, quite unusual for a Colonel, he received a full military funeral at Arlington National Cemetery. The riderless black stallion with the

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backwards boots led the caisson. There was a 19 gun salute and there was an impressive crowd at the graveside. We still have no idea what Hayden did for the CIA, but it must've been fairly substantial.

We learn from the McGehee book on that there were a couple of distinctive cadres within the CIA. There was the founding group of Boston Brahmins headed by Wild Bill Donovan, followed after the war by the careerists. Hayden would've been a natural part of the first group. We learn also from McGehee he that they were engaged in intelligence collection, which never had the priority it should and was not terribly well done, and covert operations, which got the glory. My guess would be that Hayden was part of the latter. He was very much a man of action. He was a gentleman, a James Bond sort of person, dapper and engaging but always somewhat reserved.

Hayden was the Dean of the group. He was the oldest and had the most impressive resume, by derring-do if not by title.

Bud Liebes was the most dangerous kind of liberal. He was likable, persuasive, and balanced. An absolutely charming human being.

He was born in 1921 in Pennsylvania and became a tail gunner in World War II. He flew out of Italy on bombing missions over Austria and Yugoslavia. Those are the types of experiences that will mature man very quickly.

His French wife Georgette had died before we met Bud. He spoke so lovingly of her that we felt her presence all the while. They had a couple of daughters, one of whom, Michelle, lived in in Bethesda with Bud and died a couple years before he passed away from cancer. Michelle in turn had a couple of daughters, one of whom, Rachele, who actually wound up working at the Starbucks. Bud was a real family man and it was a delight to see him with his daughter and grandchildren.

Bud's career head brought him into the Stars and Stripes, the Armed Forces newspaper, immediately after the war. He was assigned to cover Eisenhower as he made a tour of Europe prior to running for the presidency. At that point he was the president of Columbia University. Bud

had a couple of rather colorful observations. Eisenhower disdained the Germans and was rather undiplomatic in greeting them on his tour of Germany. He also didn't have a whole lot of use for the French, who had not been the greatest of allies. Bud said that his that Eisenhower's outward charm was always on display, but it masked some very human weaknesses.

Bud went into journalism in San Francisco. He joined the News Call Bulletin and followed when it transferred to the San Francisco Chronicle. After working a number of years as reporter he got involved with San Francisco State as a professor and wound up as the head of the journalism department. He was there during the student uprisings of the 60s, and he had nothing but praise for SF State's President, Sam Hayakawa, the only university administrator in the whole California system who stood up to the student demonstrators. He spoke with pride about how the tiny Hayakawa, who stood only about 5'3", strode up to a group of protesters and simply unplugged their loudspeakers, challenging them to do something about it. Bud may have been a liberal, but he believed in academic freedom. That certainly included the freedom from thuggery and intimidation by students.

Bud and I took predictable liberal and conservative sides of the standard issues: education, race, gender, universal healthcare and immigration among others. Though he held himself to be fair, he could not resist digging me with jibes such as the question as to how anybody could pick Sarah Palin as a running mate. In his book every conservative was somehow mentally defective, and it was his mission to save those of us who showed some promise of redemption. Since the group was predominantly liberal he found that others would readily join in needling me, and my questions about Al Gore's publicly known academic record, and Obama's lack of same, were simply brushed off. When they pressed me as to whether a Black could be intelligent, I replied, of course, look at Clarence Thomas, Thomas Sowell and Paul Robeson. When they asked the obvious, about the Democratic candidate for president, I responded only with a wry grin. Pressed hard, I offered to give them an Obama if they would give me a George Bush, but it was a deal they could not stomach.

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The area in which Bud was most upset with me was my relationship with my family. I tried to bring my son Jack to our meetings. I hoped especially that he would form a relationship with Bud. Jack wanted no part of it. He came once or twice, but did not join the discussion or benefit from it. During the years he spent in college in California he became increasingly distant from me as he absorbed the millennial culture. He railed more and more against "the man," and I am sure I represented the quintessential "man."

I was quite candid in my observations about my children, all of whom were thoroughly postmodern and had learned that if they were uncivil to me, or cut me off entirely, their mother would not only back them but be quietly pleased. I in turn rather coolly assessed their strengths and weaknesses, perhaps not being very diplomatic in my failure to overlook the latter.

When it came to a head and I split from my wife, Bud made a point of letting me know when he had seen her on the town with this or that handsome man. He held the chivalrous view that a marriage was for better or worse, and that I should have put up with my situation – especially as a conservative and a defender of family values. The years have shown that I made the right decision, but I have to respect Bud's instinctive defense of received wisdom. I'm definitely preaching Bud's wisdom to my new family.

This may define the essence of the liberal conservative debate. Liberals never give up hope. Conservatives try to see things as they are. There is a need for both.

Enduring marriages were a theme among the group at Starbucks. Hayden and Bud were widowers who had been married for 50 some years. Dick and Beny Munson were another constant fixture at our table. Dick had served in the Army in the Battle of the Bulge and had been awarded the Silver Star and two Bronze Stars. My recollection is that he led his men out of an encirclement, covering them personally as they escaped. He had gone on to the diplomatic service and had met his wife Benedicta, who we known as Beny, in Brazil. Both in their 80s, they fully complemented each other. They understood each other, respected each other, and could share tales.

Dick had worked for the United States Information Agency overseas. The USIA had suffered some political ups and downs, rising and falling in influence. It is my recollection that Dick was in line for an ambassadorship and then the position disappeared. In any case he had risen to be the assistant director.

Dick was a quiet, thoughtful man. I don't remember his taking strong positions on any particular subject. Like most of the people in the Starbucks group, he was a believer in the United States and in its government. He had been part of it, he was proud of his service, and I think he believed in the integrity of the government. The Greatest Generation was not tainted by as much cynicism as we who succeeded them. Skepticism of the government expressed by the radical left had become a fixture in Berkeley by the time of my upbringing. It had become far more thoroughly institutionalized by the early 2000s, but these members of the Greatest Generation seemed to be above it. They generally believed in government programs. They would defend Social Security, Medicare, socialized medicine beyond that, and basically most of Johnson's war on poverty, great society, and equal opportunity programs.

Beny was thoroughly American in her outlook. Her roots may have been in Brazil, but she had been in the United States for so long that I don't recall her holding any opinions that would've been outside of mainstream American thinking. She was a loyal, supportive and loving wife to a man who seemed to manifest every characteristic a woman could want in a husband. It is one of the wonders of modern life that previous generations – the Greatest Generation - so often achieved that which moderns express a desire to attain but so infrequently accomplish.

Dick and Eileen Levine were similarly perfectly matched. They usually came as a couple, although they had no fear of being by themselves. Dick was the more assertive of the two. He quite proudly wore his background on his sleeve. He was a descendent of Lithuanian Jews. His father had been a tailor as I recall.

Born in 1925, he enlisted towards the end of the war and did not see action. Like so many of his peers, Dick represented the first generation of his family to go to college. Clark College was close

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to home in Massachusetts, and he made the most of that opportunity. He became a member of the Federal Trade Commission, defending United States interests overseas, and later went into private law with big firms in Washington. He was a card-carrying and proud member of the American Civil Liberties Union. Dick supported their rather absolutist interpretation of personal freedom, fondly saying that there is a "slippery slope" and once you start to compromise, there is no convenient place to stop. He celebrated whistleblowers such as Daniel Ellsberg and Edward Snowden who challenged Washington's secrecy and duplicity. He celebrated them all the more if they happened to expose crimes committed by people on the right such as Dick Cheney, in the service of George W. Bush.

When it came to warfare, Dick was a dove. He did not support Israel in its suppression of the Palestinians. He constantly railed against Lyndon Johnson and the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. He was equally consistent in lambasting George W. Bush for his invoking the weapons of mass destruction argument to start the war in Iraq. He constantly harped on the fact that there had been no weapons of mass destruction, and that Al Qaeda was not to be found in Iraq. That is, it was not in Iraq until America had upset things and seemingly invited them. Dick did not often change my mind, but on the subject of Iraq time brought me more and more to his way of thinking.

Dick was an advocate for anything socialized, with medicine heading the list. And he was reliably on the side of the people against the police, unwilling to condone any sort of police brutality or accept the notion that sometimes the malefactors would not respond to anything except force.

Dick, the lawyer, was a strong advocate. He would tenaciously hang onto a position, repeating the same argument, using only different words, over and over. I had to appreciate that I would never change his mind. He was who he was. However, he did a very forceful and thorough job of presenting whatever point of view he was advocating.

Eileen is more measured. She would listen carefully to every point of view. I expect that she rarely changed her own opinions, but she was not as strong as Dick in advocating them.

Dick was an accomplished clarinetist and sax player. His son Michael is in the New York music business, and also plays brass as I recall. Both of them are impresarios. They put on highly professional musical productions every year in Sumner Village, drawing from the great wealth of talent in the retirement village itself and the surrounding community. It was a high point of the local social calendar.

John and Lois Martin came to the group after I had been a member for a couple of years. John is a retired professor of journalism at the University of Maryland. Lois was assistant superintendent of the Montgomery County public schools. They are widely read, especially in education.

One of the things that surprised me in my research is how small of a footprint these of the Greatest Generation have left on the Internet. There are probably more pages that come up under my own name than all of them put together. Yet, reviewing their biographies, one would have to say that they have certainly achieved at least as much in life. This is an anomaly.

Dr. L. John Martin comes up as an expert on the international press, having co-authored an article on the media impact on terrorism in 1986. He is quoted as an expert on the African press, noting that Africa has never had a journalistic press, but rather an opinion press. Two citations, both several decades old. The search on Lois Martin comes up with a 1983 document on the use of microcomputers in the Montgomery County Public Schools. It is a period piece, anticipating how computers might be used, before their role had become defined through the emergence of word processors, spreadsheets, graphic packages and of course the Internet. I don't remember Lois ever talking about computers in our conversations at Starbucks.

Nonetheless, John and Lois would contribute actively on just about every topic. I was a substitute teacher, classroom teacher and then student at the University of Maryland College of Education. I pursued a PhD, first in education, then statistics. We had lots to talk about, and had some interesting exchanges.

I offered my opinions about millennial generation high school students in comparison with my own

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youthful experience and about my quixotic, curious run-ins with political correctness with regard to race and gender. The Martins tended to play down my observations. The system had been good to them, and I suspect that as people who had come of age in the 1940s, their impressions of the academy were formed in an era which prized academic freedom and open discussion. In their day threats had come more from the right – Joe McCarthy and HUAC – and the Martins had played their role in supporting free speech.

As with the other couples I've mentioned, John and Lois have a close marriage. It is the foundation of their successful lives. And I felt myself a black sheep in comparison, having failed in two marriages at the time I knew them. The Starbucks couples somehow made it work the first time. It is not because there are any shrinking violets among these women I have mentioned. They are certainly intelligent and assertive. The pairs, however, have managed to let the benefits of partnership outweigh the individual personalities in every case. That is certainly a lesson for subsequent generations.

Mike Pistor was in the Foreign Service, US Ambassador to Malawi. He had come up through through USIS rather than State, so his appointment was somewhat unusual, a recognition of uncommon ability. He was a kind and articulate man who suffered from some neurological disease that killed him in 2009, somewhat shy of his 80th birthday.

Mike gave a long interview about the time of his retirement, available online by Googling "Ambassador Pistor." The highlights of his life echo those of the rest of the group. A long, happy marriage, and in his case, two successful children and three grandchildren.

Mike was a diplomat to the core, very modest and nonconfrontational. He was modest as well about his daughter's accomplishments as a Hollywood producer of children's cartoons. When he spoke of his family life, the most frequent references were to his childhood in Arizona. He described it as idyllic, as it must have been to have formed such a man.

Harry Pfohl was the only other regular member who is something of a conservative. Harry's

background is in engineering and real estate. I do not recall that he was a strenuous advocate for conservative positions – I bore that role more than anybody else. He was less taken in by the Democratic candidates of our time. He was certainly not willing to subscribe to the consensus view that George Bush had stolen the 2000 election from Al Gore, or that Kerry was a significantly more intelligent man than George Bush.

During the 2004 election I was very ready myself to believe the swift boat book about how Kerry had comported himself in Vietnam. The liberal clique was of course quite skeptical of both facts and motives. To me it held together well as a narrative, and what was written was consistent with my impression of the people with whom I had served in Vietnam. Harry was too pleasant of a guy to argue vociferously, but nor did he buy the party line.

Harry's wife was invited to join us but she always had better things to do. Here again was a comfortable, stable marriage, but one that didn't require equal measures of interest in political discussion. She preferred areas in which she could make a difference.

I introduced Bill Hanford to the group. Bill was my church acquaintance, of my age, a very sharp patent attorney who was slowly dying of afflictions to his lungs and his limbs. He was a reliable conservative, but his verbal acuity was failing as his body gave out on him. Starbucks offered an opportunity to get out of the house, which was something that his wife Mona welcomed he and really needed. My Ford Windstar was high enough that he could get in and out easily. Bill in turn brought some of his friends, whose names I don't remember and whom I do not believe came without him.

Jim Hoover was another fixture in the group, albeit with a quite different background. He was about five years younger than me and had never married. His father had been in the diplomatic corps in the Caribbean, which is where Jim grew up. He had been a bit of a rebel from the start. He hung around the docks on the islands. He became a captain of sailing yachts, serving the wealthy. He had a good command of the English patois of the Caribbean islands, and could mimic both the voices and opinions of the islanders.

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Jim was a staunch and not disinterested advocate of government programs. He favored socialized medicine because he could not afford private medicine. His lifetime of drinking and drugs had occasioned some medical problems that needed expensive attention.

He obviously believed that health care had to be an entitlement granted by the government. He would never respond to questions about how fair it was that his medical bills should be paid by a levy on other people's earnings. The argument was always at a more abstract level. His premise was that the productivity of the whole society has to be better when the people are in better health, and he took it as a given that more health care spending equated to better healthcare outcomes. The arguments that the tax mules could only carry so much weight didn't sit well with him.

The rest of us were well enough off that we could afford the taxes they paid. They would've supported Oliver Wendell Holmes's claim that taxes are the price we pay for living in a civilized society. I, speaking for the minority, would observe that civilization could scrimp by with 10% of what was being taken, and that the extra 90% went to a government that was eroding our civilization.

Jim graduated from college down in Florida to please nobody but himself. After spending his young adulthood bumming around the Caribbean, doing many things well, but everything primarily for his own self-satisfaction and certainly not for money, he turned his attention to the things his family found important. Such as education and sobriety. He had a stellar college career, and delighted in teaching his fellow students as he was learning himself.

Somewhere along the way he took up bicycling. Typically, he made himself an expert in every aspect of the sport. First and foremost he was a strong cyclist – I'm pretty good, but I couldn't keep up with him. He knew everything about a bicycle: buying one, fixing one, and riding one. He knew everything about the sport, who the competitors were, their tactics, their teams, and their foibles. When Jim rode into Starbucks on his bicycle, you knew everything was right in his world.

Jim loved history – it was his major in college, and he continued to drink all the knowledge he could absorb. The Starbucks crowd was a pretty impressive group... Ex-ambassadors, ex-spies, retired lawyers and business people. Jim didn't yield to anybody in knowledge of history. If you mistook the Glorious Revolution for Cromwell's ascension to leadership of England, he was on you in a nanosecond.

Although he did everything with perfection, Jim was such an individualist that he found it hard to locate jobs that were to his suiting. He did some woodwork for us briefly in the summer of 2006. No wonder he never made any money – he invested far more effort into getting the job right than we had contracted to pay. He did a marvelous job of refinishing our country style oak dining room set, and then the maple and cherry front door which had been handmade by a guy with a greater sense of artistry than maintenance. Jim diagnosed what our craftsman had done wrong and came up with a prescription for how to fix it one time, and more important, how to make it stay fixed. We couldn't pay him what it was worth, but both he and I came away from the engagement feeling good. We both exulted in his craftsmanship.

I called Jim periodically from Kyiv just to see how things were going, and by chance spoke to him a couple of days before he died in 2010. He was the same guy as always. Low-key and without an ounce of self-deception. He told me matter-of-factly that the Starbucks group had not been the same for several months, with Mike Pistor's passing and Bud's moving out of the neighborhood. He sounded wistful. I pray for his soul, hoping he finds himself in a better place. He was a good man and a good friend.

Among the other regular members was Paul. Paul didn't contribute intellectually to the discussions, but the group was too polite to exclude him, and Paul was impervious to hints that he might leave. Paul didn't have the background for the discussions, but was never bereft of opinions.

Paul was an odd duck. In his 40s, never worked but made ends meet, however barely, on the income from a trust fund. Jewish, homosexual, and by his definition conservative. I didn't see much of the conservatism in him – just a bizarre collection of fringe opinions. With regard to his

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homosexuality, he was too scared of the diseases to practice it. The impression he gave was that he had antennae in his head, receiving radio signals from another planet. He would always warn us breathlessly about some impending disaster, such as OPEC going off the dollar standard and ending the dollar's status as the world's reserve currency, or Osama bin Laden blowing up Washington. If you tried to tie him down he would never cite authoritative sources, but again, he would never let you believe that they did not exist. My understanding is that he was drummed out of the group for his frequent anti-Semitic rants –an odd affair for a Jewish guy.

Starbucks is an open place, and our conversations were quite public, especially in the summer when we could sit outside. Quite a few people joined us occasionally. There was Roger Washington, handsome husband of a Swiss diplomat, an articulate black who was quite comfortable letting his wife support him. There was Laura Harding, an attractive and intelligent woman in her 30s who befriended Jim Hoover in his last years. Ann Tucker, a young mother so wholesome that Roger called her "Susie Creamcheese."

The most regular members of the group, those who set the intellectual pace, were members of The Greatest Generation. They believed in their country, they believed in its government, and they believed in family values. In my mind they represented a high watermark of all three.

By the time of our meetings in the early 2000's there were serious doubts about the integrity of our presidents. Johnson, Nixon and Reagan had all bent the rules to achieve political ends. Clinton was more venal – he bent the rules for personal enrichment and to prey on interns. While political hangers on have always been tainted with corruption, it seemed to grow worse over time. In every presidential election since 2000 there have been serious questions about even the intelligence of the candidates - of both parties, nominees and also-rans. Our leaders are no longer the best and brightest.

If our Starbucks members of The Greatest Generation represented a gene pool, it would be headed for extinction. None of the the regulars had the requisite four grandchildren that would be needed to sustain their population. This to me is a

tragedy. These people represent the culmination of Enlightenment thinking, the most workable set of values ever to have evolved. Yet, as liberals they did not see their project as complete, and they advocated policies that in my mind seemed to undo the progress that had been made. In particular, they modestly declined to recognize their own achievements and did not have the sense of moral certainty that would've been necessary to pass their values along, whether via progeny or instruction of others. Their altruism led them to believe that all their fellow men were of equal worth, whereas quite clearly, by most measures they are not. We will not see their like again, and I am sad to conclude that it is due in some part to their own misplaced convictions: too great faith in their fellow man, and too little in themselves.

As I write this, in 2015, I am attempting to start a similar discussion group in Kiev. It is uphill work. I have not found any groups of former Soviets who could sustain such conversations. In their youth they were simply not allowed the freedom of speech that would be required. Moreover, they are handicapped by not reading easily in English. I find an orders-of-magnitude gulf between the amount I have read and even the brightest of this society.

I nurse the hope that this society will again be ascendant after a thousand year dormancy. I sense an impending collapse in the West brought on by unsupportable debt, the failure of the best and brightest to reproduce themselves, unsustainable immigration and a stifling political correctness that makes it impossible to discuss these issues. Civilization is nonetheless a tenacious creature. There will be places on earth where free discussion is welcome and new ideas are nurtured. I hope, for the sake of my young son among others, that Ukraine is one of them. In any case I would like to reproduce what Starbucks created for us in suburban Washington, a place where active minds can come together.