

Is America in a golden age, and if so how will we know?

SPIN CONTROL



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NBC The Hollywood classic “The Wizard of Oz” cast included Bert Lahr, Judy Garland, Ray Bolger and Jack Haley. The film fell between the golden ages of radio and TV.

BY JIM CAMDEN FOR THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

The proclamation of a “golden age of America” by President Donald Trump in his inaugural address Monday was initially pretty exciting.

The price of gold is close to a record high; so as long as that isn’t a metaphor for inflation, it seemed hard to complain about being around for a new golden age. But doing the hard work is sometimes the job of a political columnist.

Vague memories of college lectures in Western Civilization 101 – it’s been more than 50 years, so a different kind of golden age ago – brought back incomplete recollections of such previously declared time spans. My West Civ text books are long gone, so I turned to the internet for a refresher.

Greece had a Golden Age, for much of the fourth century BCE, that began after the Greeks beat the Persians, first at the Battle of Marathon – without which the world would have no reason to stage races of 26.2 miles – and then after the Battle of Thermopylae – without which gun rights activists would not have a reason to buy flags and T-shirts with semi-automatic rifles and a slogan MOLON LABE in Greek letters, translating to “Come and take them.” (It should be noted here that the King Leonidas was saying that about the Spartans’ swords, which the Persians eventually did come and take, albeit at a very high cost. If the Greeks had had semi-automatic rifles and large-capacity magazines, the outcome could have been different.)

The ensuing golden age was great for philosophy, literature, drama, architecture and some experiments in democracy. Not quite so great for the other city states around Athens, as the area slowly slid into wars that so weakened the Greeks that they were overrun by the Macedonians.

Rome had a golden age that started near the end of the first century BCE. The country was chugging along as a republic, conquering just about anything in reach, when Gaius Octavius decided “enough of this meddlesome Senate,” declared himself emperor Augustus and ushered in a period where Rome was the biggest thing between the Atlantic Ocean and China.

It was pretty great if you were a Roman – shiny temples, good roads, aqueducts for water, more literature and a Coliseum that made it possible for later generations to think up Gladiator movies.

Not so great if you were anywhere near Mount Vesuvius around 79 CE. But the so-called Pax Romana for the next 150 years that some cite as a feature of that golden age probably was tarnished a bit for Christians in the Coliseum and people in other countries who didn’t like being part of the empire and tried to break away.

England had a golden age for the 45 years that Elizabeth I was queen. It was pretty peaceful compared to the reign of her father and older sister, and great if you liked to go to plays, listen to poetry, wear frilly collars or were a ship’s captain with a license to capture Spanish galleons full of gold stolen from the New World. Not so good if you caught the Black Death, were accused of witchcraft or were burned at the stake for being Catholic.

That nation got a second golden age from about 1815 to 1914, much of it when Victoria was queen. More great literature, more economic growth, more

exporting of British culture and governance to the far corners of the world, often by soldiers in colorful uniforms and unusual facial hair. Great if you had a title in front of your name, owned land, factories or large houses in London or the countryside – or all of the above. Not so great if you worked in those factories or swept out the chimneys of those houses, or were Irish, Indian or African.

There's a golden age of Hollywood, for movies between the late '20s and early '60s, which may have been particularly golden in terms of profits for the studios and certain stars, but not so much for child actors who were drugged so they could work long hours, minorities who were rarely seen as anything but servants, and writers who refused to rat on coworkers when the House Unamerican Activities Committee called them in.

There's a golden age of radio, from the 1930s to the 1940s, which was a good time for radio dramas and great newscasters like Edward R. Murrow reporting on the bombs falling in London. But it was also a time when millions could listen to Father Charles Coughlin spew pro-fascist and antisemitic views.

There's a golden age of television, generally regarded as the 1950s and early 1960s, when the medium was so new that people tried all kinds of things to see if they would work, and some of them did. It was golden in black and white, with funny little antennas that sometimes couldn't get rid of all the fuzz on the tiny screens.

In truth, one can find a so-called golden age listed for most countries and all manner of activities.

A golden age of comics, a golden age of animation, a golden age of science fiction, a golden age of hip-hop. There's even a golden age of piracy, in the 1600s and 1700s, which was probably pretty great for guys like Bluebeard and helpful at inspiring roles for Errol Flynn and Johnny Depp; not so much for the ships they sank and the towns they pillaged.

By some reckonings, the United States has already had two golden ages. One was the "Gilded Age" in the late 1800s when a relative few made big fortunes in railroads, land speculation, mining and finance. Great for them, although things weren't so good for Black and Native Americans, children working in factories and many immigrants. Perhaps that's why it was gilded – not solid gold, but just a thin coating of gold on the outside to cover less valued stuff underneath.

Some people also refer to the period between 1945 and 1960 as an American golden age, when the country's population swelled, the Gross National Product more than doubled, an interstate highway system was being built to carry people from coast to coast in cars with V-8 engines burning cheap gasoline, and supposedly everyone lived like Ozzie and Harriet. You just have to overlook the Korean War, the Cold War, the arms race, segregation, the McCarthy hearings, polio scares and your home life if it didn't look anything like the ones you saw on TV.

The thing about most golden ages is they are declared retroactively, sometimes centuries later by people who weren't there.

Others are labeled golden by people who were there but are looking back from a span that enlarges the good and shrinks or blots out the bad.

Couldn't find an example of someone successfully declaring that a golden age was starting and was able to have it come true.

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