

Surviving the '80s: Decalogy Comes of Age

Some predictions for 1980 have already foundered on reality. Ten years ago, for example, the Institute for the Future suggested that by this year contraceptive chemicals could be distributed to the public through the water supply. Five years ago, a Center for Futures Research report saw OPEC in disarray by 1980. Not surprisingly, many scholars now suggest that this popular "if-present-trends-continue" school of forecasting is intellectually bankrupt. Fortunately, writes historian Sybil Schwartz, there is an alternative: the "rigorous" new science of "Decalogy." If, as she argues (with what appears to be the utmost solemnity), the Decalogists are right, the coming decade will be the least eventful era America has seen since the age of Chester Arthur.

by Sybil Schwartz

No subject has so captured the imagination of Americans as the decade of the 1980s. With George Orwell's fateful 1984 just around the corner, everyone anxiously wants to know precisely what lies ahead. Coaxed by prominent foundations and think tanks, scholars have rushed in where prophets fear to tread.

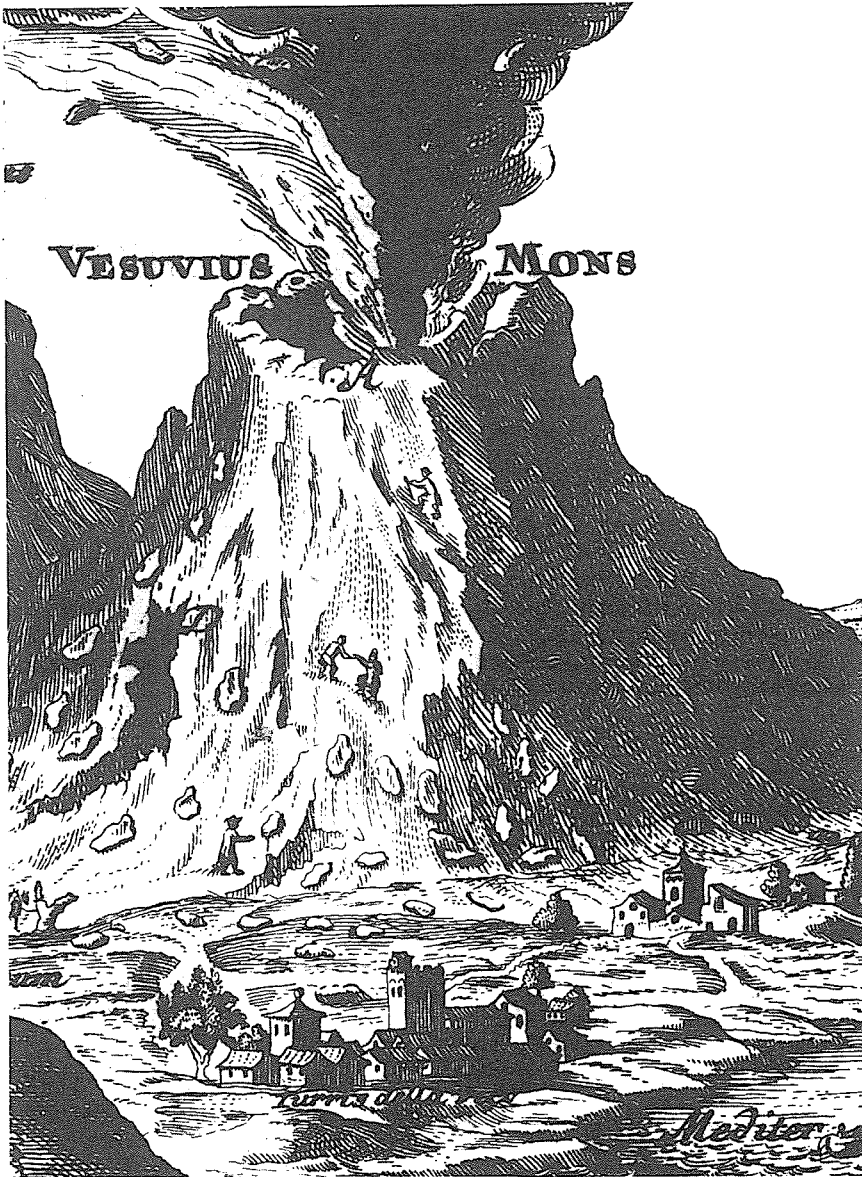
And like the bookshelf needed to store them, the scope of the resulting studies stretches from here to eternity: *Thinking About the '70s and '80s*; *Who's Afraid of 1984?*; *The International Energy Situation: Outlook to 1985*; *Toward the Year 2018*; *The Next 10,000 Years*.

Yet even the best of such studies, with their Bauhaus graphics and their long lists of blue-ribbon contributors, are not good enough.

To be sure, they are full of sage predictions and "words of learned length," like Goldsmith's parson. But when one probes for the scientific underpinnings, one finds a common assumption running through all the predictions—namely, that one can project from the very recent past and present to determine what will happen in the future.

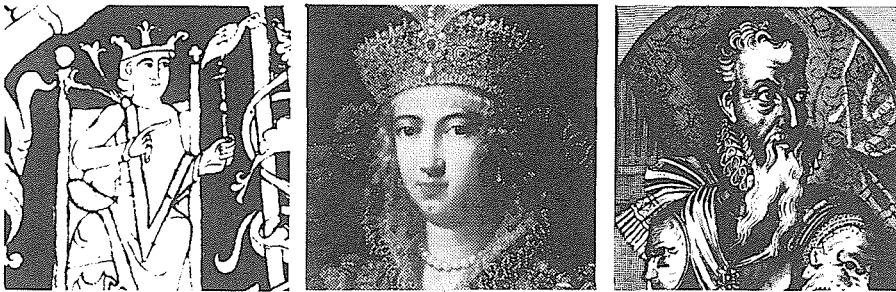
Nothing could be sillier.

If the human body continued to grow at the rate achieved during the first 15 years of life, we would all be about 22 feet tall when we received our first social security checks. If someone in 1959 had used the previous five years' experience to project the height of Chrysler tailfins by 1980, he would have warned of appendages six feet high. Instead, we



ALINARI/Editorial Photocolor Archives

The eruption of Vesuvius, A.D. 79: the storm before the calm? Great events, Decalogists believe, are crammed disproportionately into "79" years in order to occur before the arrival of the historically placid '80s. Predictably, Vesuvius erupted again in 1779, Mount Etna in 1979.



Reprinted by permission of Politikens Forlag.

ALINARI/Editorial Photocolor Archives

From Histoire de Ferdinand-Alvarez de Toledo by Jean Guignard.

Britain's William the Conqueror (left), France's Catherine de Medici (center), Spain's Duke of Alva (right). All died in the '80s. Decalogists also note with quiet satisfaction that the Parthenon was partially destroyed in 1687.

have no tailfins and may not have any Chryslers.

Yet there is a rigorous science capable of penetrating the future. This science, which has emerged on the academic scene with startling rapidity, is confounding its critics and fast rendering obsolete entire university departments with each fresh disclosure.

I refer, of course, to the discipline of Decalogy.*

Decalogy seeks out the "inner rhythms" of history, as manifested in each decade. Just as "bio-rhythms" reveal hidden phases in the behavior of our bodies, so Decalogy lays bare the little noticed regularities of history. And Decalogy tells us that the

*In the 1977-78 academic year, the latest period for which data are available, 213 college departments were closed or consolidated nationwide in order to make room for new departments of Decalogy. Hardest hit: political science, sociology, and, inexplicably, agronomy. According to the American Society of University Professors, more than half of the 1,587 tenured faculty with Dec.D. degrees are teaching in California.

1980s will be a dull period, very dull.

The entire range of human history forces Decalogists ineluctably to this conclusion. We know that the 1580s marked the beginning of the Ottoman Empire's dreary decline and that the politics of the 1680s in Japan produced little more than some legislation protecting dogs; in the 1780s, France's economy hit the skids and its bureaucracy grew, and the 1880s merely saw Lesotho made a protectorate of Britain.

This tedious pattern extends back through all of recorded history. With the intensified use of carbon-14 dating techniques, we shall no doubt be able to trace it back even further.

The '80s have always been decades in which interesting people die and dull ones are born. Among those who have given up the ghost during previous '80s are William the Conqueror (1087), the Duke of Alva (1582), Catherine de Medici (1589), and Samuel Johnson (1784). What a contrast to the bland crew who entered the world in past '80s. Are we to cel-

Sybil Schwartz is the occasional pen name of a young American historian. Her essay, "In Defense of Chester Arthur," appeared in the Autumn 1978 issue of The Wilson Quarterly.

celebrate in 1984 the bicentennial of the birth of Zachary Taylor? Or the centennial in 1985 of the birth of poet Humbert Wolfe? All of us like to think that our own friends are a lively bunch. But ask yourself: How many of them were born in the '80s?

Decalogy gives scientific depth to what common sense has already told us. We all know, for instance, that the 1960s were a tumultuous decade, but thanks to Decalogy, we can now appreciate that the '60s were always thus. Our own Civil War, the great emancipation of the serfs in Russia in 1861, and Bismarck's "Blood and Iron" speech of 1862 all conform to this pattern. By the late '70s of each century, though, life begins to slow down. Characteristic events include, for example, the birth of the justly forgotten Czech composer Rudolf Friml in 1879. By the '80s, human affairs have invariably sunk from *adagio* through *adagio sostenuto* to *largo*, à la Friml.

Exceptions immediately spring to mind. What about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and the destruction of Pompeii in the year A.D. 79, or the birth of dictator Joseph Stalin in 1879?

Decalogists have long pondered such apparent anomalies. Yet, far from contradicting the general truths enunciated above, such events actually confirm them. All are examples of the phenomenon of *anticipation*. All manner of dramatic events have occurred on the eve of past '80s, as if rushing to slip in before the dawn of tedium. Hence Vesuvius and Stalin. With eery prescience, the most philosophical of Roman emperors, Marcus Aurelius, departed this life just in time to enable his well-named son, Commodus, to assume office in the year 180.

Anticipation is even more common at the end of the '80s, as if human affairs become infected by a zeal to move into the more vital (or "gay") '90s. The energetic King Richard Coeur de Lion ascended the British throne in 1189 and the French Revolution broke out in 1789. In both cases, of course, the real action came only later, when Richard set out on the Third Crusade, and Robespierre, a typical '90s man, drove the French Revolution to its bloody climax.

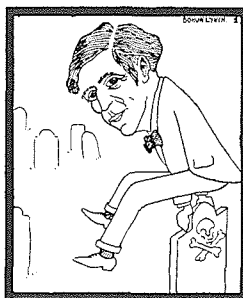
A true understanding of the dynamics of Decalogy helps one to strip away false perceptions and see



Used by permission of G. Schirmer, Publishers.



From a marble bust found at Ostia.



Used by permission of Ann Wolfe.

Composer Rudolf Friml, the Emperor Commodus, poet Humbert Wolfe were quintessential '80s people. Wrote Wolfe: "Other men have written worse/Than the author of this verse/But at least they had the wit/Not to go and publish it."



Reprinted by permission of Babe Ruth Baseball.



From *Makers of Electricity*. Fordham University Press, 1909.



From *History of the Crusades* by Major Proctor.

Sluggo Babe Ruth (left), physiologist Luigi Galvani (center), the capture of Jerusalem by the Crusaders (right). In the '90s, Decalogists contend, history always tries to make up for time lost during the previous decade.

many events in their true light. The English may have dubbed their change of rulers in 1688 a "Glorious Revolution," but Decalogy assures us that nothing very revolutionary really occurred—which is just what the British wanted and why they considered it "glorious." When genuinely revolutionary events do take place in an '80s decade, they are almost never appreciated until the decade has passed. Leibnitz issued his differential calculus in 1684 and Isaac Newton published his *Principia Mathematica* in 1687, but it took several years before the cheering began.

If the '80s are bound to be flat and dreary, watch out for the '90s. The tempo invariably picks up. Luigi Galvani's discovery of "animal electricity" in 1791 is an utterly characteristic event of the final decade in any century. Others: Columbus's voyage to America (1492), the discovery of the electron (1895), the arrival of the Crusaders at the gates of Jerusalem (1099), and the birth of Babe Ruth (1894). Such epochal moments could never have occurred during the '80s, a decade epitomized 300 years ago by the last sighting of the Dodo bird (1681) and, fast upon

its heels, the annexation of what is now Iowa by France (1682).

It should be obvious that centennial years are fated to produce events on a millennial scale. The coronation of the emperor Charlemagne in 800 could only have taken place at the dawn of a new century. So too with the discovery of Brazil in 1500, and the conquest of the Punjab by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1000. We can reasonably expect this pattern to continue in the year 2000.

As any scientist knows, years after Joseph Priestley discovered oxygen in 1774 (N.B.), there were still those who sang the praises of phlogiston. Similarly, there are still pockets of retrograde historians holding out against Decalogy.* They insist that it is merely a "pseudoscience," like phrenology or sociology, and that its purported "truths" are nothing more than computational accidents arising from the Christian calendar. Take another calendrical system (they imply) and the entire edifice of Decalogy—including its wisdom

*See, for example, *Dekalogiia i burzhuzniiia falsifikatsiia budushchego*, by G. A. Guboshliapkin (Ibansk, 1977) and *Les Carnets Secrets de la Decalogie*, by Therèse Stopowska (Gdynia, 1979).

about the '80s—will go up in smoke.

Will it?

The Islamic peoples date events from Muhammad's *hegira* in the year A.D. 622. By this reckoning, the presidency of Warren Gamaliel Harding would have to be counted as a centennial event, as would the conversion of Riga to Protestantism (1522) and the founding of St. David's College, Lampeter, Cardiganshire, for the training of Episcopal priests in Wales (1822). So much for the Muslim calendar.

What about the Hebrew calendar, which counts from the year 3761 B.C.? Regrettably, this has practically nothing to recommend it to the serious Decalogist, unless Scotland's "Drunken Parliament" (1661) or the union of Moldavia and Wallachia as Rumania (1861) strikes one as noteworthy.

Moreover, the Hebrew calendar assigns such lively periods as the fifth decade of each century (the '40s, our style) to the soggy penultimate spot and transforms the monotonous '80s into the dynamic ("roaring") '20s. It would have us believe, in other words, that World War II, the Revolutions of 1848, and the breakup of the Danish empire (1042) were minor incidents in history, and that events like the Rebellion of the Yellow Turbans in 184 and the founding of the Society of Incorporated Accountants and Auditors (1885) should be everywhere memorialized.

A second argument raised against Decalogy is that it is invalid for B.C. dates. It is true, of course, that a serious controversy has raged among Decalogists over this matter. It has

only recently been resolved.

On the one side were a few misguided scholars who insisted on counting the years 20 to 10 of each century before Christ as the "eighth" decade. On the other side were the clearsighted majority, who preferred to count backwards from the birth of Christ and hence recognize the pathetic decline of the Parthian Empire in 88–70 B.C. as the typical event of the '80s it is. The decisive victory of this second school of thought has resolved the matter of B.C. dates once and for all. We can now recognize such events as the Battle of Marathon in the year 490 B.C. as the turning points they were. Even 2,500 years later, one can sense the Athenians' eagerness to rout the Persians before the onslaught of the flabbier decade of the '80s.

So, faithful to history's internal rhythms, we will be in the doldrums for the next 10 years despite all current predictions to the contrary. But monotony is not without its virtues—especially in light of what we can expect from the decade after that. During the hectic 1990s, we should brace for renewed campus turmoil as the children of the Baby-Boom children crowd into public universities and the remaining private colleges. Defense analysts will note with horror that our B-52 bombers are twice as old as their pilots, even as Kremlinologists speculate about who will succeed Brezhnev's ailing successor. King Charles will occupy the British throne and Caroline Kennedy will be of presidential age.

We'll need all the rest we can get.

