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OPINION

BELTWAY CONFIDENTIAL

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The good old days weren't

By: **MICHAEL BARONE**
Senior Political Analyst
06/24/09 1:27 PM EDT

Brink Lindsey of the Cato Institute has an excellent article in this month's *Reason* responding to liberals like Paul Krugman who are nostalgic about the economically more egalitarian midcentury America in which they grew up. Lindsey looks back at the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s and finds "a combination of in-group solidarity and out-group hostility" which most Americans, including most liberals, would be uncomfortable with today. Racism and sexism were not only rampant but also important defining characteristics of midcentury America; so were restraints on competition, cultural conformism and the stultifying effects of what William Whyte described in his 1950s book *The Organization Man*. Here's part of Lindsey's conclusion:

Paul Krugman may long for the return of selfdenying corporate workers who declined to seek better opportunities out of organizational loyalty, and thus kept wages artificially suppressed, but these are creatures of a bygone ethos—an ethos that also included uncritical acceptance of racist and sexist traditions and often brutish intolerance of deviations from mainstream lifestyles and sensibilities.

Lindsey has covered this ground more fully in his two admirable books, *Against the Dead Hand: The Uncertain Struggle for Global Capitalism*, and *The Age of Abundance: How Prosperity Transformed America's Politics and Culture*.

One more thing. As Lindsey points out, the trend toward more equal incomes received a greater boost from World War II than anything else. During that war government consumed more than 40% of gross domestic product and enrolled, at one time or another, 16 million men in the military. Those are policies that are simply impossible or at least highly undesirable today. Is anyone proposing that we have a military of 37 million men and women—which would be the equivalent of the 1942-45 military as a proportion of population? Yeah, I thought not.

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