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Now For the Hard Part

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The end of 2008 was a time of "shock and awe." We are stumbling into 2009 dazed, confused and more than a little afraid.

The shock will wear off. Then, we are going to find out who we are, or perhaps what we have become.

We've taken hard hits in the past, picked up the pieces, and started to rebuild. This time the hit is going to be a long and painful unwinding of decades of bad habits, bad leadership and bad mistakes by those we assumed had a base level of competence and responsibility.

We can bewail and blame. But we can't change the next 12 months. By all accounts, we're strapped in for a very rough outing.

How we get through it is going to be a matter of fortitude and attitude. Pick your position. Is the glass half empty, half full -- or did somebody take the glass and smash it against the wall? In times like these, optimism is a decision.

Our historic resiliency may have atrophied in the soothing soak of good times. We are twice removed from the "greatest generation". After Vietnam and aside from a few short-term financial scrapes, the baby boom has had a sweet ride. While the advantages were certainly not evenly distributed, boomers have generally lived well, stayed healthy and had a pretty good time.

Our children's' generation had all that, plus they were raised in the warmth of our obsessive concern for their happiness and self-image -- a generation where, win or lose, everybody gets a trophy.

And now this.

It's said that the key to happiness is the ability to look reality in the eye, and deny it. Happiness, maybe. But not the ability to step up to one of the toughest times in our history. We can't deny the reality of a country that has been shaken to its very identity.

Will families become stronger, or will they begin to crack under the strain? Will new values emerge, or will the ones that got us in trouble simply be put on hold? Will square footage, portfolio growth and other past measure of success be replaced by things more lasting and spiritual? Will we reach out to those who are hurt the most, or will we spend our time making sure we are among those who are hurt the least? Will a country of special interests sacrifice for the greater good, or will we see a domestic protectionism that hobbles real solutions?

These questions and more will be answered in a year of both trial and illumination - a year unlike any in memory.