

How old is too old to keep on going?

BY CORY FRANKLIN
Chicago Tribune

In a controversial article in the October issue of *The Atlantic*, Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel writes, "Seventy-five. That's how long I want to live: 75 years."

The controversy is not strictly because of the sentiment he expresses; many people feel the same way he does about growing old. Even Psalm 90 in the Bible describes a similar life-span for man: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten (70); and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years (80), yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."

Nor, to his credit, does

Emanuel draw cheap attention to himself by advocating for legalizing euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. He has always been against those movements and in favor of improving hospice and end-of-life care.

But his remarks are provocative because he is one of the most influential doctors in America — a key health adviser to President Barack Obama, as well as brother of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel. When he advocates life past 75 is not worth living, at some point there may be public-policy implications.

In the article, he writes, "The fact is that by 75, creativity, originality, and productivity are pretty much gone for the vast, vast majority of us. ...

It is true, people can continue to be productive past 75 — to write and publish, to draw, carve, and sculpt, to compose. But there is no getting around the data. By definition, few of us can be exceptions."

Before consigning everyone over 75 to the fate of *Soylent Green* (if you're under 50, Google that reference), Emanuel should be reminded what his world might look like were it not for those exceptional people over 75.

When he was over 75, President Ronald Reagan gave his famous speech challenging Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall. No speech was more crucial to ending 20th century European communism.

While Emanuel, a Demo-

crat, may hold no special fondness for Reagan, in terms of political balance, he need only look at Edward Kennedy, the longtime Democratic senator from Massachusetts. In 2008, when Kennedy was over 75, he compared Obama to his brother, President John F. Kennedy. The senator then made the momentous decision to endorse Obama for the Democratic nomination for president at the expense of Hillary Rodham Clinton. Without the Kennedy endorsement, Obama might not have won the nomination and become president.

In his 80s, British leader Winston Churchill completed one of the 20th century's greatest historical works, "A History of the English-Speaking Peoples." Astronaut John Glenn, the first American to orbit the Earth, became the oldest person to fly in space at the age of 77. In a remarkable and underreported life, adventurer Barbara Hillary, having survived cancer, became the first African-American woman to reach the North Pole at the age of 75. Four years later, she made it to the South Pole, becoming the first African-American woman to visit both poles.

In *The Atlantic*, Emanuel despaired of the declining contributions of elderly scientists. Yet when he was 88, Dr. Michael DeBakey, America's greatest heart surgeon, supervised Russian cardiac surgeons who performed bypass surgery on Russian President Boris Yeltsin. DeBakey practiced medicine, lectured, and wrote well into his 90s. His medical career alone spanned Emanuel's natural life-span of 75 years. Barbara McClintock won the Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine when she was in her 80s for her ground-

breaking work in genetics.

If any group has the right to take issue with Emanuel, it is attorneys. When he was 78, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. issued an opinion, familiar to every law student, that outlined the limits of free speech: He wrote that the First Amendment "would not protect a man falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic." His colleague, Louis Brandeis, served on the court for 23 years, well into his 80s. Four of the nine current Supreme Court justices are over 75.

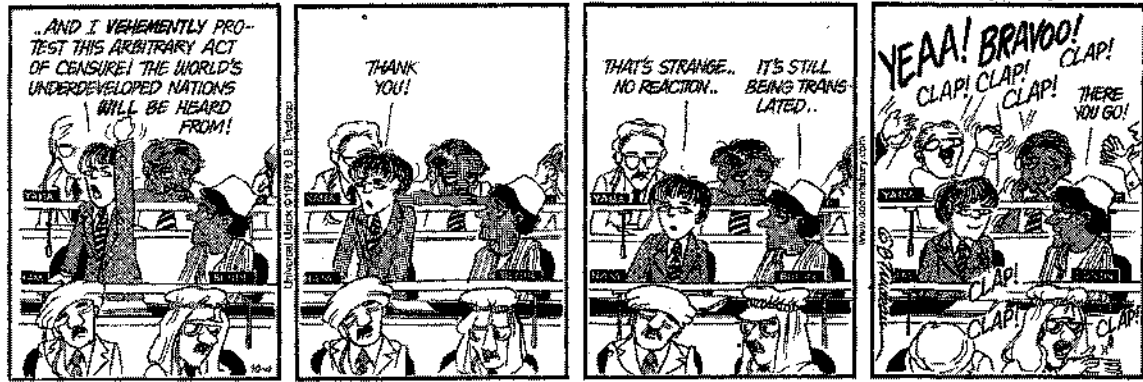
Great authors including George Bernard Shaw and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe did some of their best writing after they were 75, and two of the immortal artists of the Renaissance, Michelangelo and Titian, worked prolifically until they were nearly 90.

But put aside all the accomplishments of the extraordinary elderly. Emanuel has overstepped his bounds for reasons other than those "exceptions." Simply consider ordinary people over 75 — all the love and affection they give to others, as well as all the love and affection others give to them. Imagine how much poorer our country would be without that love.

Emanuel's ostensibly common-sense advice that people should not live past 75 brings to mind what the philosopher Bertrand Russell once wrote, "This is one of those views which are so absurd that only very learned men could possibly adopt them." Russell happened to be 87 when he wrote that.

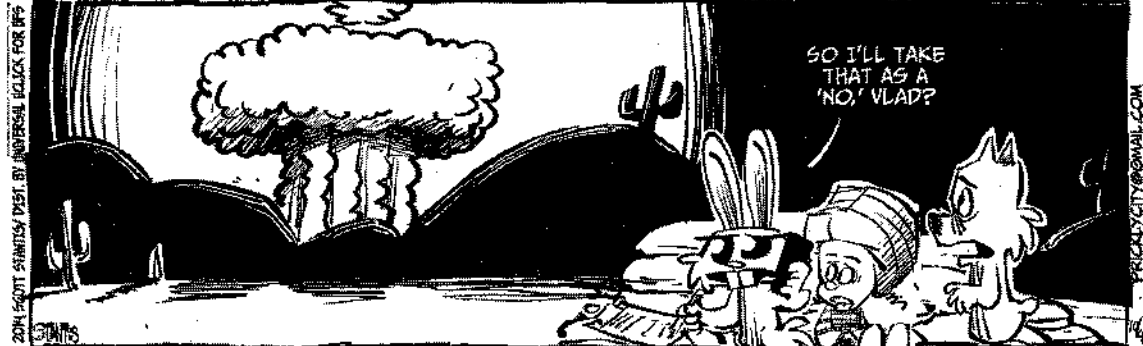
Dr. Cory Franklin is the author of a collection of essays, "Chicago Flashbulbs: A Quarter Century of News, Politics, Sports and Show Business (1987-2012)."

DOONESBURY



By Garry Trudeau

PRICKLY CITY



By Scott Stantis