

The New Generation Gap

Gen X Papers: The New Generation Gap Generation X Papers

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By Neil Howe and William Strauss

It isn't yet at a sixties boil, but the emerging conflict between forty somethings and twenty somethings will help to define this decade "Among democratic nations each generation is a new people." ---Alexis de Tocqueville Two world views, reflecting fundamentally different visions of society and serf, are moving into conflict in the America of the 1990s. A new generation gap is emerging. In the late 1960s the fight was mainly between twenty-year-olds and the fifty-plus crowd. Today it's mainly between young people and the thirty- to-forty-year-olds. In these gaps, the old 1960s one and the emerging 1990s facsimile, there have been two constants: Each time, the same conspicuous generation has been involved. Each time, that generation has claimed the moral and cultural high ground, casting itself as the apex of civilization and its age-bracket adversaries: as soul-dead, progress-blocking philistines. The first time around, the members of that generation attacked their eiders; now they're targeting their juniors.

We're talking about Baby Boomers. Born from 1943 to 1960, today's 69 million Boomers range in age from thirty-two to forty-nine. Defined by its personality type, this generation is somewhat different from the group defined simply by the well-known demographic fertility bulge (1946-1964). At the front end, the grown-up "victory babies" of 1943--peers of Janis Joplin and Bobby Fischer, Joni Mitchell and Geraldo Rivera, Oliver North and Rap Brown, R. Crumb and Angela Davis, Newt Gingrich and Bill Bradley--include the first Dr. Spock toddlers; the fiery college class of 1965; the oldest Vietnam-era draft-card burners; the eldest among "Americans Under 25," whom Time magazine named its "1967 Man of the Year"; and the last twenty-nine-year-olds (in 1972) to hear the phrase "under-thirty generation" before its sudden disappearance. At the back end, the grown-up Eisenhower babies of 1960 are the last-born of today's Americans to feel any affinity with the hippie-cum-yuppie baggage that accompanies the Boomer label.

The younger antagonists are less well known: America's thirteenth generation, born from 1961 to 1981, ranging in age from eleven to thirty-one. Demographers call them Baby Busters, a name that deserves a prompt and final burial. First, it's incorrect: The early-sixties birth cohorts are among the biggest in U.S. History--and, at 80 million, this generation has numerically outgrown the Boom. By the late 1990s it will even outvote the Boom. Second, the name is insulting--"Boom" followed by "Bust," as though wonder were followed by disappointment. The novelist Doug Coupland, himself a 1961 baby, dubs his age-mates "Generation X" or "Xers," a name first used by and about British Boomer-punkers. Shann Nix, a journalist at the San Francisco Chronicle, suggests "postics" (as in "post-yuppies"), another name that, like Coupland's, leaves the generation in the shadow of the great Boom. We give these young people a nonlabel label

that has nothing to do with Boomers. If we count back to the peers of Benjamin Franklin, “Thirteeners” are, in point of fact, the thirteenth generation to know the U.S. flag and the Constitution. More than a name, the number thirteen is a gauntlet, an obstacle to be overcome. Maybe it’s the floor where elevators don’t stop, or the doughnut that bakers don’t count. Then again, maybe it’s a suit’s thirteenth card—the ace—that wins, face-down, in a game of high-stakes blackjack. It’s an understated number for an underestimated generation.

The old generation gap of the late 1960s and early 1970s featured an incendiary war between college kids and the reigning leaders of great public institutions. Back then the moralizing aggressors were on the younger side. And back then Americans in their thirties and early forties (the “Silent Generation,” born from 1925 to 1942) stood in between as mentors and mediators. The new generation gap of the 1990s is different. It features a smoldering mutual disdain between Americans now reaching midlife and those born just after them. This time the moralizing aggressors are on the older side. And this time no generation stands in between. What separates the collective personalities of Boomers and Thirteeners? First, look at today’s mainline media, a hotbed of forty-year-old thinking. Notice how, in Boomers’ hands, 1990s America is becoming a somber land obsessed with values, back-to-basics movements, ethical rectitude, political correctness, harsh punishments, and a yearning for the simple life. Life’s smallest acts exalt (or diminish) one’s personal virtue. A generation weaned on great expectations and gifted in deciphering principle is now determined to reinfuse the entire society with meaning. Now look again—and notice a countermood popping up in college towns, in big cities, on Fox and cable TV, and in various ethnic side currents. It’s a tone of physical frenzy and spiritual numbness, a revelry of pop, a pursuit of high-tech, guiltless fun. It’s a carnival culture featuring the tangible bottom lines of life—money, bodies, and brains—and the wordless deals with which one can be traded for another. A generation weaned on minimal expectations and gifted in the game of life is now avoiding meaning in a cumbersome society that, as they see it, offers them little.

For evidence of this emerging generation gap, take a look at a Fortune magazine survey earlier this year asking employed twentysomethings if they would ever “like to be like” Baby Boomers. Four out of five say no. Peruse recent surveys asking college students what they think of various Boomer-sanctioned moral crusades—everything from “family values” to the “New Age movement.” By overwhelming margins, they either disapprove or are remarkably indifferent. Recall the furious Thirteeners’ responses that appeared just after the media’s celebration of the twentieth anniversary of Woodstock, or after the recent turn away from yuppie-style consumption (“Let the self-satisfied, self-appointed, selfrighteous baby-boomers be the first to practice the new austerity they have been preaching of late,” Mark Featherman announced in a New York Times essay titled “The 80’s Party Is Over”). Notice the pointed anti-Boomer references in such Thirteeners’ films as *Running on Empty*, *Pump Up the Volume*, *Heathers*, *True Colors*, and *Little Man Tate*, or in the generation-defining prose of such emerging young writers as Coupland, Nix, Brett Easton Ellis, Nancy Smith, Steven Gibb, Eric Liu, Gael Fashingbauer, David Bernstein, Robert Lukefahr, and Ian Williams.

Already Thirteeners blame Boomers for much that has gone wrong in their world, a tendency that is sure to grow once Boomers move fully into positions of political

leadership. Remember, these are the young people who cast their first votes during the 1980s, for the party (Republican) and the generation (of Reagan and Bush) that Boomers at like age loved to excoriate. More recently the end of the Cold War and the “Bush recession” have persuaded Thirteeners to go along with an all-Boomer Democratic ticket. But fortysomething politicians can hardly rest easy. This latest turn in what Coupland calls the “microallegiances” of today’s young people also reflects a toxic reaction to what Boomers have done to the other party (even right-wing Thirteeners shuddered to hear the Quayle and Quayle “values” preaching) and a vehement backlash against the status quo (pre-election opinion polls showed Ross Perot’s strongest support coming from under-thirty voters).

Whatever economic and cultural alienation Thirteeners feel over the next decade—and they will feel plenty—will inevitably get translated into hostility toward the new generation in power. If being a resented older generation is a novel experience for Boomers, and if life on the short end feels ruinous to Thirteeners, each group can take a measure of solace in the repeating generational rhythms of American history. About every eighty or ninety years America has experienced this kind of generation gap between selfrighteous neopuritans entering midlife and nomadic survivalists just coming of age.

Boomers

“Something strange is going on in the hearts of baby boomers,” announced American Demographics magazine in a recent article heralding the 1990s. Around the same time, Good Housekeeping took a full-page in The New York Times to run an ad inspired by the Boomer marketing guru Faith Popcorn. The ad welcomed America to “the Decency Decade, the years when the good guys finally win. . . . It will be a very good decade for the Earth, as New Traditionalists lead an unstoppable environmental juggernaut that will change and inspire corporate America, and let us all live healthier, more decent lives,” when consumers will “look for what is real, what is honest, what is quality, what is valued, what is important.” All across America, Americans in their thirties and forties are answering Rolling Stone’s call to “muster the will to remake ourselves into altruists and ascetics.” If, a decade earlier, twentysomething hippies evolved into thirtysomething yuppies, the new fortysomethings are now putting (according to the demographer Brad Edmondson) “less emphasis on money and more on meaning.” How can this be? How can a generation that came of age amid the libidinous euphoria of People’s Park now be forming neighborhood associations to push “alcoholics, drug dealers, and wing nuts” out of Berkeley parks and out of their lives? How can a generation that a decade ago went, as Todd Gitlin put it, “from ‘J’accuse’ to Jacuzzi” now be leaving the Jacuzzi for a cold shower? Over the past five decades, as Boomers have charted their life’s voyage, they have consistently aged in a manner unlike what anyone, themselves included, ever expected. They began as the most indulged children of this century, basking in intensely child-focused households and communities. Benjamin Spock mixed science with friendliness and instructed parents to produce “idealistic children” through permissive feeding schedules. To most middle-class youths, poverty, disease, and crime were invisible-or, at worst, temporary nuisances that would soon succumb to the inexorable advance of affluence. With the outer world looking fine, the inner world became the point of youthful focus. Their parents expected Boomers to be, in William Manchester’s words,

“adorable as babies, cute as grade school pupils and striking as they entered their teens,” after which “their parents would be very, very proud of them.” In 1965 Time magazine declared that teenagers were “on the fringe of a golden era”—and, two years later, described collegians as cheerful idealists who would “lay out blight-proof, smog-free cities, enrich the underdeveloped world, and, no doubt, write finis to poverty and war.” Hardly.

Over the next several years Boomers discovered that they were never meant to be doers and builders like their parents. Instead, finding their parents’ constructions in need of a major spiritual overhaul, even creative destruction, they triggered a youth-focused “Consciousness Revolution.” Along the way, they became what Annie Gottlieb has described as “a tribe with its roots in a time, rather than place or race.” That time was the late sixties, when the term “generation gap” gained currency. The term was coined (and used most frequently) by the hard-charging dads of the “GI Generation,” born from 1901 to 1924, a cohort reaching from Walt Disney to George Bush, whose 25 million surviving members today range in age from sixty-eight to ninety-one. Back in the heady days of what the historian William O’Neill has dubbed “the American High,” the GI peers of John F. Kennedy made much of “gaps”—missile gaps, science gaps, poverty gaps. Gaps were something they thought themselves quite good at building bridges across. But not this one. Beginning in the late 1960s the generation gap became a full-fledged age war. The youthful Boom ethos was deliberately antithetical to everything GI: spiritualism over science, gratification over patience, pessimism over optimism, fractiousness over conformity, rage over friendliness, self over community. “STRIKE!” became the summons, the clenched fist the emblem, T-shirts and jeans the uniform, and “corporate liberalism” the enemy. Screaming radicals and freaked-out hippies represented just 10 to 15 percent of America’s circa-1970 youth, but they set the tone. Off campus and at the other end of the political spectrum, a similar depth of anti-establishment rage welled up among blue-collar Boomers (who were twice as likely as their elders to vote for George Wallace in the 1968 election). The GI-Boomer age war paralleled the Vietnam shooting war. It crested in 1969, along with draft calls and casualties. A couple of years later—after Ohio’s National Guardsmen killed four Kent State students, after student opinion turned solidly against the war, and after Congress amended the Constitution to allow eighteen-year-olds to vote—Boomers began heeding the Beatles’ simple “words of wisdom: let it be.” The generation gap began to ease, in its outward forms at least, replaced by a grinding pessimism and a gray Boomer drizzle of sex, drugs, unemployment, and a sour (if less confrontational) mood on campus. In politics the Boomers settled in as more apathetic and more just plain illiberal than their rebelled-against parents could ever have imagined. In the 1970s the GI-versus-Boom clash had a quiet denouement that has proved over time to be at least as consequential as the Boomers’ angry demonstrations. No pact was signed, no speeches were made, but something of a deal was struck. On the one hand, Boomers said nothing as GIs then on the brink of retirement proceeded to channel a growing portion of the nation’s public resources (over a period from the post-Vietnam peace dividend to the post-Cold War peace dividend) toward their own “entitlements.” On the other hand, GIs did not object as Boomers asserted control of the culture. GI leaders (Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush) continued to preside at the pinnacle of government, while their retirement-bound peers became America’s first old people to call themselves “senior

citizens.” Millions of men and women who had come of age with the New Deal abandoned America’s increasingly Boom-oriented work life, separated into their own Sun City peer societies, tuned in to their own “Music of Your Life” radio stations, and began strengthening the clout of what was already the most powerful generational voting bloc in the history of global democracy. No generation in U.S. history—not even that of Jefferson and Madison—can match the GIs’ lifetime record of success at getting, holding, and using political power. At the same time, Boomers—who in the first days of the eighteen-year-old vote were expected to be a political powerhouse, sweeping candidates of their choice into the White House—played the role of political siren, first tempting candidates, then luring them to their demise. It was not until 1992, two decades after George McGovern first begged for their votes, that Boomers finally showed more political clout than the aging GI peers of LBJ and Richard Nixon (and leapfrogged the leaderless Silent Generation, which may become the first generation in American history never to produce a President). Along the way, the word “yuppie”—a term of derision among others, of self-mocking humor among Boomers—labeled a generation of supposedly sold-out ex-hippies. Introduced in 1981, the word referred to “young upwardly mobile professionals,” a group that included only about one out of every twenty Boomers. But a much larger proportion fit the subjective definition:

self-immersed & impatient for personal satisfaction, weak in civic instincts. Everything the yuppie did—what he ate, drank, listened to, lived in, and invested for—sent a negative message about GI-style culture and institutions. Notwithstanding their affluent reputation through the 1980s, Boomers, especially those born in the middle to late 1950s, have not prospered. True, they are roughly keeping pace with the (Silent) generation just before them, at each phase of life. But were it not for the rising economic power of women (and the two-income household), they would be falling behind. Debt is a big problem: U.S. News & World Report says that roughly one fourth of all professional and managerial Boomers are “nebbies” (negative-equity Boomers) teetering on the edge of personal bankruptcy. Yet amid these financial problems, polls show, Boomers overwhelmingly consider their careers better, their personal freedoms greater, and their lives more meaningful than those of their parents. They know they may not be America’s wealthiest generation, but the American Dream lives on for them in the form of a finely tuned inner life—which is one reason why aging GIs feel so little guilt about their economic condition.

Although 1990s-edition Boomers are no throwback to the 1960s, they see themselves as they did then (and always have): as the embodiment of moral wisdom. Their aging is taking on a nonapologetic quality—prompting The New York Times to relabel them “grumpies” (for “grown-up mature professionals”). The idea of telling other people what to do suits them just fine. They do not inherently dislike government; they simply want to redirect public institutions toward what they consider a socially redemptive purpose. Addressing America’s unresolved social issues, from crime and homelessness to health and education, Boomers are far more inclined than other generations to believe, with Jeffrey Bell, that “the setting of society’s standards is, in the final analysis, what politics is all about”—and to share Karl Zinsmeister’s view that “genuine compassion demands that we forgo the comfortable, and ever so easier, responses of softness.”

Whatever the problem, the Boomers' solution could not be more different from that of their parents at a like age. Their call is not for the white-coated scientist but for the black-cloaked preacher. Their prescription is not a sugar-coated elixir but a purgative tonic. Recent exit polls show that the politicians who disproportionately ride Boomer votes are either reverends (Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson, who in the 1988 primaries did better among Boomers than among others) or bearers of dark messages (Jerry Brown, Paul Tsongas, and Pat Buchanan, who did best among Boomers in the 1992 primaries). To solve social problems Boomers don't look to technology and big institutions (as did the GI peers of JFK and Nixon) or to expertise and committees (as have the Silent peers of Michael Dukakis and James Baker). Rather, Boomers look to values—the redemptive if painful resurrection of what Michael Lerner, the editor of the progressive magazine *Tikkun*, calls a "Politics of Meaning." Material abundance is not necessarily connected with such values, which is why even a severe recession could not dissuade the younger orators at the 1992 political conventions from talking less about GNP and housing starts than about moral standards and the state of America's soul (much to the bewilderment of over-fifty columnists—and to the jeers of the under-thirty viewers of MTV's *Like We Care*).

In one jurisdiction after another, Boomers who once voted for Reaganomics are now engaging in what David Blankenhorn, of the Institute for American Values, calls "a debate about causes and cures," a debate about "what we are prepared to give up." They are pushing for the explicit exercise of public authority—more taxes, zoning, schools, prisons—as long as this authority moves America toward the lofty social standard that Boomers themselves have sanctified. Boomers are stirring to defend values (monogamy, thrift, abstention from drugs) that other generations do not associate with them. The leaders among Boomer blacks, once known for the Afro cut and the black-power salute, are bypassing the rusty machinery of civil-rights legislation pioneered by their elders and are preaching a strict new standard of group pride, family integrity, and community loyalty.

A generation that came of age in an era of "Is God Dead?" is immersing itself in spiritual movements of all kinds, from evangelical fundamentalism to New Age humanism, from transcendentalism to ESP. By a substantial margin, Boomers are America's most God-absorbed living generation. Six out of ten report having experienced an extrasensory presence or power, versus only four out of ten among older generations. Six times as many Boomers plan to spend more time in religious activities in future years as plan to spend less. Values-gripped Boomers are enlisting on one side or the other of what the family-policy guru Gary Bauer has called America's "cultural civil war." Candice Bergen, Garry Trudeau, Hillary Clinton, Paul Wellstone, communitarians, pro-choicers, over here. Dan Quayle, Rush Limbaugh, "Decency Czar" Anne-Imelda Radice, Oliver North, evangelicals, pro-lifers, over there. Some Boomers are joining eco-crusades, while others who don't mind "playing God" with endangered species have opted for the Wise Use Movement. The hot new fads are "values marketing" and "non-ism"—the art of advertising, and enjoying, whatever it is you're not consuming. On both sides of the political spectrum Boomer politicians advocate stark, no-pain, no-gain "cures"—like the Oregon Plan for Medicaid triage, or Dan Quayle's demand that limits be placed on jury awards for "pain and suffering," or Al Gore's call for stiff energy taxes, or Massachusetts Governor William Weld's notion that a ten year prison sentence should mean 10.0 years

behind bars, or Bill Clinton's proposal that "we ought to have boot camp for first-time nonviolent offenders."

Boomer editorialists adamantly reject dickering with foreign tyrants, compromise on the deficit, mercy for S&L violators, welfare for anybody who doesn't work for it. Critics can and do call Boomers smug, narcissistic, selfrighteous, intolerant, puritanical. But one commonly heard charge, that of hypocrisy, ill fits a generation that came of age resacralizing America and has kept at it. Always the distracted perfectionists, they apply first a light hand, then (once they start paying attention) a crushingly heavy one. They graze on munchies until they figure it's time to diet, and then they cover themselves with ashes and sackcloth. From Jonathan Schell to Jeremy Rifkin, Charles Murray to Shelby Steele, Steven Jobs to Steven Spielberg, Bill Bennett to Al Gore, Boomers are still doing what they have done for decades: giving America its leading visionaries and wise men—or, depending on your point of view, its preachy didacts. It is in the shadow of such a generation that Thirteeners are having to come of age.

Thirteeners

As they shield their eyes with Ray-Ban Wayfarer sunglasses, and their ears with Model TCD-D3 Sony Walkmen, today's teens and twenty-somethings present to Boomer eyes a splintered image of brassy looks and smooth manner, of kids growing up too tough to be cute, of kids more comfortable shopping or playing than working or studying. Ads target them as beasts of pleasure and pain who have trouble understanding words longer than one syllable, sentences longer than three words. Pop music on their Top 40 stations—heavy metal, alternative rock, rap—strikes many a Boomer ear as a rock-and-roll end game of harsh sounds, goin'-nowhere melodies, and clumsy poetry.

News clips document a young-adult wasteland of academic nonperformance, political apathy, suicide pacts, date-rape trials, wilding, and hate crimes. Who are they, and what are they up to? On the job, Thirteeners are the reckless bicycle messengers, pizza drivers, yard workers, Wal-Mart shelf-stockers, health-care trainees, and miscellaneous scavengers, hustlers, and McJobbers in the low-wage/low-benefit service economy. They're the wandering nomads of the temp world, directionless slackers, habitual nonvoters. In school they're a group of staggering diversity—not just in ethnicity but also in attitude, performance, and rewards. After graduation they're the ones with big loans who were supposed to graduate into jobs and move out of the house but didn't, and who seem to get poorer the longer they've been away from home—unlike their parents at that age, who seemed to get richer.

In inner cities Thirteeners are the unmarried teen mothers and unconcerned teen fathers, the Crips and Bloods, the innocent hip-hoppers grown weary of watching white Boomers cross the street to avoid them. In suburbs they're the kids at the mall, kids buying family groceries for busy moms and dads, kids in mutual-protection circles of friends, girding against an adolescent world far more dangerous than anything their parents knew, kids struggling to unlink sex from disease and death. In them lies much of the doubt, distress, and endangered dream of late-twentieth-century America. As a group they aren't what older people ever wanted but rather what they themselves know they need to be: pragmatic, quick, sharp-eyed, able to step outside themselves and understand how the world really works.

From the Thirteeners vantage point, America's greatest need these days is to clear out the underbrush of name-calling and ideology so that simple things can work again. Others don't yet see it, but today's young people are beginning to realize that their upbringing has endowed them with a street sense and pragmatism their elders lack. Many admit they are a bad generation—but so, too, do they suspect that they are a necessary generation for a society in dire need of survival lessons. When they look into the future, they see a much bleaker vision than any of today's older generations ever saw in their own youth. Polls show that Thirteeners believe it will be much harder for them to get ahead than it was for their parents—and that they are overwhelmingly pessimistic about the long-term fate of their generation and nation. They sense that they're the clean-up crew, that their role in history will be sacrificial—that whatever comeuppance America has to face, they'll bear more than their share of the burden. It's a new twist, and not a happy one, on the American Dream. Trace the life cycle to date of Americans born in 1961. They were among the first babies people took pills not to have. During the 1967 Summer of Love they were the kindergartners who paid the price for America's new divorce epidemic. In 1970 they were fourth-graders trying to learn arithmetic amid the chaos of open classrooms and New Math curricula. In 1973 they were the bell-bottomed sixth-graders who got their first real-life civics lesson watching the Watergate hearings on TV. Through the late 1970s they were the teenage mail-hoppers who spawned the Valley Girls and other flagrantly nonBoomer youth trends. In 1979 they were the graduating seniors of Carter-era malaise who registered record-low SAT scores and record-high crime and drug-abuse rates. In 1980 they cast their first votes, mostly for Reagan, became the high-quality nineteen-year-old enlistees who began surging into the military, and arrived on campus as the smooth, get-it-done freshmen who evidenced a sudden turnaround from the intellectual arrogance and social immaturity of Boomer students. They were the college class of 1983, whose graduation coincided with the ballyhooed A Nation at Risk report, which warned that education was beset by "a rising tide of mediocrity." In 1985 they were the MBA grads who launched the meteoric rise in job applications to Wall Street. And in 1991 they hit age thirty just when turning "thirtysomething" (a big deal for yuppies in the 1980s) became a tired subject—and when the pretentious TV serial with that title was yanked off the air.

Like any generation, Thirteeners grew up with parents who are distributed in roughly equal measure between the two prior generations (Silent and Boom). But also like any generation, they were decisively influenced by the senior parental cohort. Much as GIs shaped the Sputnik 1950s for Boomers, the Silent Generation provided the media producers, community leaders, influential educators, and rising politicians during the R-rated 1970s, the decade that most Thirteeners still regard as their childhood home. And what did Thirteeners absorb from that generation and that era? Mostly they learned to be cynical about adults whom they perceived to be sensitive yet powerless, better at talking about issues than solving problems. For the Silent Generation, then hitting midlife, the cultural upheaval of the 1970s meant liberation from youthful conformism, a now-or-never passage away from marriages made too young and careers chosen too early. But for Thirteeners just growing up, the 1970s meant something very different: an adult world that expressed moral ambivalence where children sought clear answers, that expected children to cope with real-world problems, that hesitated to impose structure on children's behavior, and that demonstrated an amazing (even stupefying) tolerance for the

rising torrent of pathology and negativism that engulfed children's daily life. When they were small, the nation was riding high. When they reached adolescence, national confidence weakened, and community and family life splintered. Older people focused less on the future, planned less for it, and invested less in it. A Consciousness Revolution that seemed euphoric to young adults was to Thirteeners the beginning of a ride on a down escalator. The public debacles of their youth fostered the view that adults were not especially virtuous or competent—that kids couldn't count on adults to protect them from danger.

From Boom to Thirteenth, America's children went from a family culture of *My Three Sons* to one of *My Two Dads*. As millions of mothers flocked into the work force, the proportion of preschoolers cared for in their own homes fell by half. For the first time, adults ranked automobiles ahead of children as necessary for "the good life." The cost of raising a child, never very worrisome when Boomers were little, suddenly became a fraught issue. Adults of fertile age doubled their rate of surgical sterilization. The legal-abortion rate grew to the point where one out of every three pregnancies was terminated. Back in 1962 half of all adults agreed that parents in bad marriages should stay together for the sake of the children. By 1980 less than a fifth agreed. America's divorce rate doubled from 1965 to 1975, just as first-born Thirteeners passed through middle childhood. The pop culture conveyed to little kids and (by 1980) teenagers a recurring message from the adult world: that they weren't wanted, and weren't even liked, by the grown-ups around them.

Polls and social statistics showed a sharp shift in public attitudes toward (and treatment of) children. Taxpayers revolted against school funding, and landlords and neighborhoods that had once smiled on young Boomers started banning children. The Zero Population Growth movement declared the creation of each additional infant to be a bad thing, and the moviegoing public showed an unquenchable thirst for a new cinematic genre: the devil-child horror film. The same year Boomers were blissing out at Woodstock, the baby that riveted America's attention had a mother named Rosemary (Please don't have this baby, millions of viewers whispered to themselves). From the late 1960s until the early 1980s America's pre-adolescents grasped what nurture they could through the most virulently anti-child period in modern American history. Ugly new phrases ("latchkey child," "throwaway child," and later "boomerang child") joined the sad new lexicon of youth. America's priorities lay elsewhere, as millions of kids sank into poverty, schools deteriorated, and a congeries of elected politicians set a new and distinctly child-hostile course of national overconsumption. Then, when Thirteeners were ready to enter the adult labor force, the politicians pushed every policy lever conceivable—tax codes, entitlements, public debt, unfunded liabilities, labor laws, hiring practices—to tilt the economic playing field away from the young and toward the old.

The results were predictable. Since the early 1970s the overall stagnation in American economic progress has masked some vastly unequal changes in living standards by phase of life. Older people have prospered, Boomers have barely held their own, and Thirteeners have fallen off a cliff. The columnist Robert Kuttner describes Thirteeners as victims of a "remarkable generational economic distress . . . a depression of the young," which makes them feel "uniquely thirsty in a sea of affluence." Ever since the first Thirteeners reached their teens, the inflation-adjusted income of all adult men under age

thirty-five has sunk—dropping by more than 20 percent since as recently as 1979. Twenty years ago a typical thirty-year-old male made six percent more than a typical sixty-year-old male; today he makes 14 percent less. The same widening age gap can be observed in poverty rates, public benefits, home ownership, union membership, health insurance, and pension participation. Along the way, this is becoming a generation of betrayed expectations.

Polls show that most teenagers (of both sexes) expect to be earning \$ 30,000 or more by age thirty, but in 1990 the U.S. Census Bureau reported that among Americans aged twenty-five to twenty-nine there were eight with total annual incomes of under \$30,000 for every one making more than \$30,000. Welcome, Thirteeners, to contemporary American life: While older age brackets are getting richer, yours is getting poorer. Where earlier twentieth-century generations could comfortably look forward to outpacing Mom and Dad, you probably won't even be able to keep up. If, when you leave home, you have a high school degree or better, there's a 40 percent chance you'll "boomerang" back to live with your parents at least once. (Today more young adults are living with their parents than at any other time since the Great Depression.) When you marry, you and your spouse will both work—not for Boomerish self-fulfillment but because you need to just to make ends meet. If you want children, you'll have to defy statistics showing that since 1973 the median real income has fallen by 30 percent for families with children which are headed by persons under thirty. And you'd better not slip up. Over the past twenty years the poverty rate among under-thirty families has more than doubled. Your generation, in fact, has a weaker middle class than any other generation born in this century—which means that the distance is widening between those of you who are beating the average and those who are sinking beneath it.

Everywhere they look, Thirteeners see the workplace system rigged against them. As they view it, the families, schools, and training programs that could have prepared them for worthwhile careers have been allowed to rot, but the institutions that safeguard the occupational livelihood of mature workers have been maintained with full vigor. Trade quotas protect decaying industries. Immigration quotas protect dinosaur unions. Two-tier wage scales discriminate against young workers. Federal labor regulations protect outmoded skills. State credential laws protect overpriced professions. Huge FICA taxes take away Thirteener money that, polls show, most Thirteeners expect never to see again. And every year another incomprehensible twelve-digit number gets added to the national debt, which Thirteeners know will someday get dumped on them. Whatever may happen to the meek, they know it's not their generation that's about to inherit the earth. Like warriors on the eve of battle, Thirteeners face their future with a mixture of bravado and fatalism.

Squared off competitively against one another, this melange of scared city kids, suburban slackers, hungry immigrants, desperate grads, and shameless hustlers is collectively coming to realize that America rewards only a select set of winners with its Dream—and that America cares little about its anonymous losers. Sizing up the odds, each Thirteener finds himself or herself essentially alone, to an extent that most elders would have difficulty comprehending. Between his own relative poverty and the affluence he desires, the Thirteener sees no intermediary signposts, no sure, step-by-step path along which society will help him, urge him, congratulate him. Instead, all he sees is an enormous

obstacle, with him on one side and everything he wants on the other. And what's that obstacle? Those damn Boomers.

The New Generation Gap

A quarter century ago kids called older people names. These days, the reverse is true. For the past decade Thirteeners have been bombarded with study after story after column about how dumb, greedy, and just plain bad they supposedly are. They can't find Chicago on a map. They don't know when the Civil War was fought. They watch too much TV, spend too much time shopping, seldom vote (and vote for shallow reasons when they do), cheat on tests, don't read newspapers, and care way too much about cars, clothes, shoes, and money. Twenty years ago Boomers cautioned one another not to trust anyone over thirty; now the quip is "Don't ask anyone under thirty." "How can kids today be so dumb?" Tony Kornheiser, of The Washington Post, recently wondered. "They can't even make change unless the cash register tells them exactly how much to remit. Have you seen their faces when your cheeseburger and fries comes to \$1.73, and you give them \$2.03? They freeze, thunderstruck. They have absolutely no comprehension of what to do next."

Amidst this barrage, Thirteeners have become (in elders' eyes) a symbol of an America in decline. Back in the 1970s social scientists looked at the American experience over the preceding half century and observed that each new generation, compared with the last, traveled another step upward on the Maslovian scale of human purpose, away from concrete needs and toward higher, more spiritual aspirations. Those due to arrive after the Boomers, they expected, would be even more cerebral, more learned, more idealistic, than any who came before. No chance—especially once Boomers started to sit in judgment and churn out condemnatory reports on the fitness of their generational successor. To fathom this Boom-defined Thirteener, this creature of pleasure and pain—this "Last Man" of history, driven only by appetites and no longer by ideas or beliefs—you can wade through Francis Fukuyama's commentary on Nietzsche. Or you can just imagine a TV-glued Thirteener audience nodding in response to Jay Leno's line about why teenagers eat Doritos: "Hey, kids! We're not talkin' brain cells here. We're talkin' taste buds."

Over the past decade Boomers have begun acting on the assumption that Thirteeners are "lost"—reachable by pleasure-pain conditioning perhaps, but closed to reason or sentiment. In the classroom Boomers instruct the young in "emotional literacy"; in the military they delouse the young with "core values" training; on campus they drill the young in the vocabulary of "political correctness." The object is not to get them to understand—that would be asking too much—but to get them to behave. Back in the era of Boomers' youth, when young people did things that displeased older people—when they drank beer, drove fast, didn't study, had sex, took drugs—the nation had an intergenerational dialogue, which, if nasty, at least led to a fairly articulate discourse about values and social philosophy. Today the tone has shifted to monosyllables ("Just say no"). The lexicon has been stripped of sentiment ("workfare" and "wedfare" in place of "welfare"). And the method has shifted to brute survival tools: prophylaxis or punishment.

This generation—more accurately, this generation’s reputation—has become a Boomer metaphor for America’s loss of purpose, disappointment with institutions, despair over the culture, and fear for the future. Many Boomers are by now of the settled opinion that Thirteeners are—front to back—a disappointing bunch. This attitude is rooted partly in observation, partly in blurry nostalgia, partly in self-serving sermonizing, but the very fact that it is becoming a consensus is a major problem for today’s young people. No one can blame them if they feel like a demographic black hole whose only elder-anointed mission is somehow to pass through the next three quarters of a century without causing too much damage to the nation during their time.

To date Thirteeners have seldom either rebutted their elders’ accusations or pressed their own countercharges. Polls show them mostly agreeing that, yes, Boomer kids probably were a better lot, listened to better music, pursued better causes, and generally had better times on campus. So, they figure, why fight a rap they can’t beat? And besides, why waste time and energy arguing? Their usual strategy, in recent years at least, has been to keep their thoughts to themselves. On campus Thirteeners chat pleasantly in P.C. lingo with their “multiculti” prof or dean and then think nothing of spoofing the faculty behind their backs (they can’t be totally serious, right?) or playfully relaxing with head-phones to the racist lyrics of Ice Cube or Guns N’ Roses. But among friends they talk frankly about how to maneuver in a world full of self-righteous ideologues. Every phase and arena of life has been fine, even terrific, when Boomers entered it—and a wasteland when they left. A child’s world was endlessly sunny in the 1950s, scarred by family chaos in the 1970s. Most movies and TV shows were fine for adolescents in the 1960s, unfit in the 1980s. Young-adult sex meant free love in the 1970s, AIDS in the 1990s. Boomers might prefer to think of their generation as the leaders of social progress, but the facts show otherwise. Yes, the Boom is a generation of trends, but all those trends are negative. The eldest Boomers (those born in the middle 1940s) have had relatively low rates of social pathology and high rates of academic achievement. The youngest Boomers (born in the late 1950s) have had precisely the opposite: high pathology, low achievement. Again and again America has gotten fed up with Boom-inspired transgressions. But after taking aim at the giant collective Boomer ego and winding up with a club to bash Boomers for all the damage they did, America has swung late, missed, and (pow!) hit the next bunch of saps to come walking by. Constantly stepping into post-Boom deserts and suffering because of it, Thirteeners see Boomers as a generation that was given everything—from a Happy Days present to a Tomorrowland future—and then threw it all away. Many a Thirteener would be delighted never to read another commemorative article about Woodstock, Kent State, or the Free Speech Movement. Or to suffer through what Coupland calls “legislated nostalgia”—the celebration of supposedly great events in the life cycle of people one doesn’t especially like.

Thirteeners fume when they hear Boomers taking credit for things they didn’t do (starting the civil-rights movement, inventing rock-and-roll, stopping the Vietnam War) and for supposedly having been the most creative, idealistic, morally conscious youth in the history of America, if not the world. Even among Thirteeners who admire what young people did back in the sixties, workaholic, values-fixated Boomers are an object lesson in what not to become in their thirties and forties. Put yourself in Thirteen shoes. Watching those crusaders gray in place just ahead of you—ensconced in college

faculties, public-radio stations, policy foundations, and trendy rural retreats—you notice how Boomers keep redefining every test of idealism in ways guaranteed to make you fail. You're expected to muster passions against political authority you've never felt, to search for truth in places you've never found useful, to solve world problems through gestures you find absurd. As you gaze at the seamy underside of grand Boomer causes gone bust, you turn cynical. Maybe you stop caring. And the slightest lack of interest on your part is interpreted as proof of your moral blight. No matter that it was the crusaders' own self-indulgence that let the system fail apart. The "decade of greed" is your fault. "Compassion fatigue" is your fault. The "age of apathy" has your monosyllabic graffiti splattered all over it. What Thirteeners want from Boomers is an apology mixed in with a little generational humility. Something like: "Hey, guys, we're sorry we ruined everything for you. Maybe we're not such a super-duper generation, and maybe we can learn something from you." Good luck. A more modest Thirteener hope is that Boomers will lighten up, look at their positive side, and find a little virtue in the "Just do it" motto written on their sneaker pumps. Like two neighbors separated by a spite fence, Boomers and Thirteeners have grown accustomed to an uneasy adjacency.

Another Tale of Two Generations

Some time ago the fortyish writer Cornelia A. P. Comer published a "Letter to the Rising Generation" in this magazine, accusing people in their twenties of "mental rickets and curvature of the soul." of a "culte du moi," of growing up "painfully commercialized even in their school days." Blaming this on "a good many haphazard educational experiments" that had "run amuck" and ignored "the education of the soul," Comer asked, "What excuse have you, anyhow, for turning out flimsy, shallow, amusement-seeking creatures?" She went on, tossing insults like mortar shells: The rising generation cannot spell . . . ; its English is slipshod and commonplace . . . Veteran teachers are saying that never in their experience were young people so thirstily avid of pleasure as now . . . so selfish, and so hard! . . . Of your chosen pleasures, some are obviously corroding to the taste; to be frank, they are vulgarizing . . . the bulk of the programme is almost inevitably drivel, common, stupid, or inane. Responding to Comer, also in this magazine, the twenty-five-year-old Randolph Bourne defended his generation as a logical reaction to the "helplessness" of parents and other adults. "The modern child from the age of ten is almost his own 'boss,'" he observed, adding that "the complexity of the world we face only makes more necessary our bracing up for the fray." His defense went on: We of the rising generation have to work this problem out all alone . . . I doubt if any generation was ever thrown quite so completely on its own resources as ours is . . . The rising generation has a very real feeling of coming straight up against a wail of diminishing opportunity. I do not see how it can be denied that practical opportunity is less for this generation than it has been for those preceding it.

Bourne did not waste the chance to express a growing twenty something bitterness at the prim hypocrisy of people in their forties. We have retained from childhood the propensity to see through things, and to tell the truth with startling frankness . . . It is true that we do not fuss and fume about our souls, or tend our characters like a hot-house plant. . . . We cannot be blamed for acquiring a suspicion of ideals . . . We are more than half confident that the elder generation does not itself really believe all the conventional ideals which it seeks to force upon us . . . You have been trying so long to reform the world by making

men “good,” and with such little success, that we may be pardoned if we turn our attention to the machinery of society, and give up for a time the attempt to make the operators of that machinery strictly moral. We are disgusted with sentimentality.

It sounds like a typical Boomer-versus-Thirteener spat of the 1990s—like some argument you might imagine reading between William Bennett and Brett Easton Ellis. But the Comer-Bourne letters were published eight decades ago, in 1911. Comer’s “Missionary Generation,” born from 1860 to 1882, had a life cycle that foreshadowed the Boomer experience. Comer’s peers were raised in the aftermath of national cataclysm (the Civil War), indulged as children, spectacular as students, furious with soul-dead fathers, absorbed with the “inner life,” unyielding as reformers, and slow to form families—but, once they did, they were determined to protect their tots from the wildness of kids then in their teens and twenties. Likewise, Bourne’s “Lost Generation,” born from 1883 to 1900, began life in a most Thirteener like way: born in a time of social and spiritual turmoil, neglected as children, disappointing as students, pushed very young into a cash economy of throwaway urchins, and constantly bossed around and criticized as a “bad kid” generation.

Whatever age bracket the young Lost entered, they felt it had been somehow ruined by those who preceded them. In 1911 the generational clash between Missionary and Lost was just getting started—that is, it was about where we see the relationship between Boomers and Thirteeners today. But within a decade the clash grew far more strident, became a major defining element of the national mood (putting much of the “roar” into the 1920s), and triggered wide-ranging moralistic policy responses, from Prohibition to a sudden crackdown on immigration. No one can say for sure where the Boomer-Thirteener generation gap is heading. But by looking closely at the experience of these antecedent generations, we have at least some basis for predicting what could happen in the decades ahead.

The Missionary Generation

Let’s start with the missionaries—a generation that today’s GI seniors remember as the aging “wise men” who presided over the Second World War, as elders who possessed a social respect and cultural influence vastly exceeding what GIs themselves have at the same age. Yet the generation of Franklin Roosevelt, Douglas MacArthur, George Marshall, Henry Stimson, Harold Ickes, and Bernard Baruch was far more recognizable as Boomer like when young. They had enormous egos and an undying fixation on selfdiscovery, values, and moral confrontation. This was also the generation of Billy Sunday and William Jennings Bryan, of Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman, of W.E.B. DuBois and Upton Sinclair, of angry muckrakers and violent Wobblies. Missionaries grew up in a world of orderly families and accelerating prosperity, and among adults who were more enthusiastic about science and industry than about faith. Older generations felt themselves to be living in a rapidly modernizing era whose main shortcomings were ethical and could someday be remedied by the young. From the first modern image of a gift-toting Santa Claus to the first amusement parks, from lavishly funded public schools to new women’s colleges, the world was, for Missionaries, a hothouse of adult attention. W.E.B. DuBois remembered his boyhood home town as a “child’s paradise,” Jane Addams how her girlfriends had been “sickened with

advantages.” Likening this Little Lord Fauntleroy style of child nurture to the Dr. Spock 1950s, the family historian Mary Cable has described this “long children’s picnic” as “a controlled but pleasantly free atmosphere.” Thunder struck when these kids came of age. Armed with self-discovered principles, they rebelled against the very Santa Claus complacency and Horatio Alger materialism in which they had been raised. In the workplace they triggered anarchist violence and labor radicalism. In the countryside they enlisted in populist crusades. In the cities they indulged in food-faddism and raged against elider-built political machines, horrified by what George Cabot Lodge found to be “a world of machine-guns and machine-everything-else.” On college campuses tens of thousands of affluent students joined Jane Addams’s settlement-house crusade. “As for questions,” Lincoln Steffens recalled, “the professors asked them, not the students; and the students, not the teachers, answered them.” Overseas they spread the Gospel worldwide under the banner of the motto “The Evangelization of the World in This Generation.” They saw themselves as having reached an apex of human consciousness, a zenith of civilization.

Maybe they were right—but their arrogance did not go unnoticed by people of other ages. During Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency, as they entered what might be called their yuppie phase, Missionaries shrugged off a weakening economy and tried to get on with their personal lives and careers. Pioneering the invention of autos and airplanes, they joined technology to their individual inner aspirations. By that decade’s end the bombs and riots they had triggered in their twenties had become something of an embarrassment to forty-year-olds showing an increasingly prudish bent. Having perfected their inner lives, Missionaries zealously began taking on the outer world. During and after the First World War they rose to positions of power over the very institutions they had attacked in their youth. They pushed a vacillating elder President into a “war to end all wars,” and then used their growing political clout to turn the brief emergency to moral purposes.

The constitutional agendas of the dries and the feminists (both of which quickly triumphed) were just part of a generational crusade against a flood tide of decadence and injustice, which the Missionaries saw pouring into the cities, splintering society, and threatening the nation’s small children. While Senator Andrew Volstead led the legislative crackdown on alcohol, Senator Francis Harrison led the crackdown on drugs, and a Missionary-led Congress put a virtual halt to immigration. Federal movie censor William Harrison Hayes pushed a Code of Decency against torrid love scenes on camera; Ku Klux Klan leaders tried to “Americanize” the heartland; Henry Ford encouraged workers toward “thrift, honesty, sobriety, better housing, and better living generally”; and the nation’s first vice squads started hunting down younger bootleggers. In *Confessions of a Reformer*, Frederic Howe explained that early assumptions as to virtue and vice, goodness and evil remained in my mind long after I had tried to discard them. This is, I think, the most characteristic influence of my generation. It explains the nature of our reforms, the regulatory legislation in morals and economics, our belief in men rather than institutions and our messages to other people. Missionaries and battleships, anti-saloon leagues and Ku Klux Klans . . . are all a part of that evangelistic psychology . . . that seeks a moralistic explanation of social problems and a religious solution to most of them. Only later on, entering old age, did Missionaries mature into the craggy personas best known to history—those whom H.L. Mencken called the “New Deal Isaiahs,” those white-haired champions of social regimentation amid economic collapse and a global war

against fascism. But that was just the last act in a series of crusades that commenced as soon as Missionaries reached midlife and were able to join their preachiness to political clout. And what was the first and most obvious target for their crusades? None other than the young Lost Generation at which Cornelia Comer had aimed her letter.

The Lost Generation

Today's Thirteeners have only the dimmest personal memory of this Lost Generation, the ex-flappers and veteran doughboys whom they vaguely recall from childhood as the burned-out old codgers of the 1960s and 1970s. But when they see old movies and newsreels, they know the label fits: Kinetic Lost, as in Jimmy Cagney and Charlie Chaplin. Evil Lost, as in Boris Karloff and Edward G. Robinson. Adventuresome Lost, as in Humphrey Bogart and Douglas Fairbanks. Mischievous Lost, as in Mac West and the Marx Brothers. Tough Lost, as in "Give 'Em Hell" Harry Truman and "Blood and Guts" George Patton. However you slice it, this was a generation short on preachers—but long on battle-scarred survivors. The last time the word "lost" was attached to American youth was in the aftermath of the First World War; it certainly never was applied to Boomers—who, if anything, grew up a little too "found" for most people's taste. But today the word is staging a comeback in descriptions of today's youth. Does the parallel fit? For a start, take a look at the social mood in which the Lost Generation grew up. Can we find any similarities between 1890-1910 and, say, 1965-1985?

Turn-of-the-century America's mood was euphoric for the coming-of-age Missionary prophets but terrifying and disorienting to children. It was an era of widespread substance abuse, when alcohol consumption rose rapidly and newly popular drugs like cannabis (sometimes sold in candy and drinks), heroin (praised by many doctors), and cocaine (back when Coke contained the real thing) went entirely unregulated. It was an era of rising immigration, a trend that reached its peak during precisely the decades (1900-1919) when the young Lost were entering the labor market. And it was an era of prosperity mixed with a crisis of confidence—when America suddenly became aware of long-standing institutional failures, when "good government" became synonymous with committees and process, when urban wickedness was blamed for destroying the family, and when Deweyesque educational reforms were in vogue. All this might sound familiar. And what about the kids themselves? Were they, perhaps, just a wee bit "bad"?

Like Thirteeners, Lost kids grew up with a nasty reputation for crime and violence (popular magazines featured stories like "Bad Boy of the Street" and "Making Good Citizens Out of Bad Boys"). From the decade just before to the decade just after 1900, the number of magazine articles on "juvenile delinquency" skyrocketed. Were they considered a little dumb? Like Thirteeners, the Lost showed little or no improvement in academic prowess from first birth cohort to last. When young Lost men took the first IQ tests, during the First World War, the results shocked the nation by showing that half the draftees had a "mental age" under twelve. During the 1920s the so-called "threat of the feeble-minded" turned many older voters against foreign immigrants (then a code phrase for stammering young workers) and prompted a Missionary psychologist, Henry Goddard, to apply "moron," "idiot," and "imbecile" as technical terms in identifying gradations of youthful stupidity. When the Lost came to fill America's elder age brackets,

in the mid-1960s, the gap in educational achievement between Americans over and under age sixty-five was the largest ever measured. Did they show a bent for self-destruction?

Like Thirteeners, the Lost had unusually high suicide rates during their youth, higher than for any other child generation ever measured—until Thirteeners themselves came along. One cause of their low collective self-esteem was an inability to excuse their own failures in the market-place (something that came easily to the generation born just before them). They were, according to F. Scott Fitzgerald, “a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success.” Did they have a passion for making and spending money? Like Thirteeners, these kids grew up glorifying self-sufficiency. The word “sweatshop” was coined for them, and the motto “It’s up to you” was coined by them. They entered the cash labor market as children at a higher rate than any American generation before or since. Unsupervised by parents or government, they liked to work for themselves (as newsies, bootblacks, scavengers, messengers, cashboys, piece-rate homeworkers). With work came money: the Lost built America’s first big children’s cash economy around candy stores and nickelodeons. Politically retrograde? Other people called them that. Coming of age, new-breed Lost women disappointed middle-aged suffragettes (who were furious at reports that young women voted for Warren Harding because he was handsome), and their men turned a deaf ear to such older campus-touring radicals as Jack London and Upton Sinclair. Fitzgerald afterward observed that it was “characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest at all in politics.” Starting in the 1920s, the Lost blossomed early into this century’s most Republican-leaning generation. Like Thirteeners, the Lost learned early that you have to be tough to survive, to flaunt the physical, to avoid showing fear. Like Thirteeners, they had to grow up fast. “At seventeen we were disillusioned and weary,” Malcolm Cowley recalled. Like Thirteeners, they came of age with a reputation for shamelessness (“This Flapper of 1915,” the older H.L. Mencken commented, “has forgotten how to simper; she seldom blushes; and it is impossible to shock her”). Like Thirteeners, they were nomadic as young men and women, drawn to cities, to markets, to risk, to the dizzying glamour of new technologies. Like Thirteeners, they expected and received little assistance from government. And like Thirteeners, they constantly heard older people tell them that their chapter of history was likely to close the book on human progress. The “Lost Generation” tag (invented by Gertrude Stein and used by Ernest Hemingway) became popular during the age wars that escalated after the First World War and during Prohibition.

The newfound Missionary emphasis on values and decency found its natural target in the “bad” Lost youths—their lust, drunkenness, violence, and “Black Sox” corruptibility. General “Black Jack” Pershing took brutal action against doughboy deserters. Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis sentenced hundreds of younger (and no longer inspirational) Wobblies to hard time, and then turned his attention to cleaning up baseball. The taint followed young adults through what Frederick Lewis Allen later called “the Decade of Bad Manners,” an era of gangsters, flappers, expatriates, and real-estate swindlers. The Lost fought back with just the sort of sarcasm, ridicule, and cynicism that was bound to rile their eiders.

Through the 1920s embittered thirty-year-olds fought ideology with desperate hedonism, babbittry with endless binges, moral crusades with bathtub gin and opulent sex. “America was going on the greatest, gaudiest spree in history,” Fitzgerald bubbled—and John Dos

Passos cried, “Down with the middle-aged!” In his 1920 *Atlantic Monthly* article “‘These Wild Young People,’ By One of Them,” John Carter observed that “magazines have been crowded with pessimistic descriptions of the younger generation”—but added, “the older generation had certainly pretty well ruined this world before passing it on to us.” Almost everything young adults went in for in the twenties—heavy drinking, loud jazz, flashy clothes, brassy marketing, kinetic dancing, extravagant gambling, sleek cars, tough talk—sent a defiant message to pompous “tired radicals” (as young writers tauntingly called them) about the futility of searching for deeper meaning. Later on, after the Lost entered midlife with a crash (the Great Depression), they changed character completely.

In families they joined their elders in protecting children almost to the point of suffocation. In the media they were the Irving Berlins and Frank Capras who pushed the culture back to practicality and community. In politics they turned isolationist and conservative, becoming the Liberty Leaguers and Martin, Barton, and Fish types whom FDR and his white-haired Cabinet blamed for impeding many New Deal crusades. Their two Presidents (Ike and Truman) were get-it-done old warriors, known more for personality than candlepower. At the peak of their earning years they tolerated a crushing 91 percent marginal income-tax rate to support the Marshall Plan for world peace and the GI Bill for a younger generation of veterans. As elders, they took pride in having ushered in the prosperous “American High,” even while younger people accused them of being cynical, rock-ribbed reactionaries. Back in the 1950s and 1960s America’s old people were extremely poor relative to the young, yet repeatedly voted for candidates who promised to cut their benefits.

The Consolations of History

Prior to the Missionaries and the Lost, America was home to three earlier pairs of generations matching the Boomer and Thirteener types, dating back to the very first Old World colonists. The experiences of these ancestral pairs give us important clues into how the attitudes and behavior of today’s Boomers and Thirteeners could change over the decades ahead. The lessons to be learned from earlier Boomerlike generations are these: Once they fully occupied midlife, they turned darkly spiritual, seeking the cerebral and the enduring over the faddishly popular. Once in control of public institutions, they stressed character and serenity of soul over process and programs. They approved of social punishments for violators of deeply held values, preaching morality and principle (which, as they grew older, became increasingly associated with age) over fun and materialism (which became increasingly associated with youth). Entering old age, they used their reputation for moral leadership to bring final closure to whatever problem America faced at the time, even at the risk of catastrophe. Whether the peers of Abraham Lincoln or of Sam Adams or of John Winthrop, they had all come of age during eras of spiritual awakening—nothing like the eras of history-bending cataclysm they all presided over as elderly priest-warriors. History suggests that the Thirteener life-cycle experience is something else altogether. Every time, the Thirteener like generations started out life as risk-taking opportunists, picking their way through the social detritus left behind by their Boomerlike predecessors. And every time, reaching midlife at a time of national crisis and personal burnout, they underwent a profound personality transformation. Their risk-taking gave way to caution, their wildness and alienation turned into exhaustion and conservatism, and their nomadic individualism matured into a preference for strong

community life. The same unruly rebels and adventurers who alarmed the Colonies during the 1760s later became the crusty old Patrick Henrys and George Washingtons who warned younger statesmen against gambling with the future. The same gold-chasing forty-niners and Civil War brigands whom Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. called a generation whose “hearts were touched with fire” became the stodgy “Old Guard” Victorians of the Gilded Era. The same gin-fizz “Flaming Youth” who electrified America during the 1920s became the Norman Rockwells and Dwight Eisenhowers who calmed America during the 1950s.

All these generations repeatedly found themselves in situations that are becoming familiar to Thirteeners. When something went right, they always got less than their share of the credit; when something went wrong, they always got more than their share of the blame. In contrast, the Boomerlike generations always found a way to claim more than their share of the credit and accept less than their share of blame. Small wonder, then, that the Boom types kept stepping in and out of generational arguments. If history tells us that the Boom-Thirteenth quarrel will worsen over the coming decade, it also suggests when and how this new generation gap could resolve itself. The experience of their like-minded ancestors suggests that once Boomers start entering old age, they will ease their attacks on Thirteeners. Once they see their values focus taking firm root in American institutions—and once their hopes are fixed on a new and more optimistic (post-Thirteenth) generation—Boomers will lose interest in the quarrel.

As they enter midlife, Thirteeners will likewise tire of goading Boomers. As they change their life tack from risk to caution, they will quit trying to argue about Boomer goals and will focus their attention on how to achieve their own goals practically, with no more hurt than is absolutely necessary. The key to a favorable resolution of the Boom-Thirteenth clash may lie in one of its inherent causes. To find this cause, visit America’s hospital nurseries or day-care centers or primary-school classrooms, grades K through 5. It’s the fledgling “Millennial Generation” of Jessica McClure and Baby M, of Jebbie Bush and AI Gore III, whose birth years will ultimately reach from 1982 or so to sometime around 2000. Recall that one big reason Boomers are so intent on policing Thirteener behavior is to clear and clean the path for these Babies on Board to grow up as the smartest, best-behaved, most civic-minded kids in the history of humankind—or, at a minimum, a whole lot better than Thirteeners. And while Thirteeners would hardly put it the same way, they, too, are eager to reseed the desert that was their youth and help the nation treat the next round of kids to a happier start in life.

Has this happened before? Yes—most recently when today’s GI seniors were children. Midlife Missionaries fussed mightily over these kids, praying that they would turn out as good as the Lost had been bad. And by all accounts that’s just what the GIs became: from the sunny optimism of Pollyanna to the team spirit of the Rooney-Garland teen films, from the good deeds performed by the uniformed CCC to the globe-conquering accomplishments of soldiers whom the Missionary General George Marshall lauded as “the best damned kids in the world.” GIs responded to the sacrifices of their parents with respectful deference. America still does not treat children very well. Older generations still burden them with mounting debt and decaying public works, and tolerate an economic order that condemns many more children than older people to poverty and unmet health-care needs.

But look around. From bipartisan proposals to increase Headstart and Medicaid funding for toddlers to surging popular interest in elementary schools, from the crack-down on deadbeat dads to the call for infant safety seats on airplanes, a national consensus is emerging that the childhood world must and will be repaired. It won't happen in time to save today's inner-city teens and \$7-an-hour twentysomethings, but maybe it will in time to save the wanted, Scoutlike kids coming up just behind Bart Simpson. If, slowly but surely, Millennials receive the kind of family protection and public generosity that GIs enjoyed as children, then they could come of age early in the next century as a group much like the GIs of the 1920s and 1930s—as a stellar (if bland) generation of rationalists, team players, and can-do civic builders. Two decades from now Boomers entering old age may well see in their grown Millennial children an effective instrument for saving the world, while Thirteeners entering midlife will shower kindnesses on a younger generation that is getting a better deal out of life (though maybe a bit less fun) than they ever got at a like age. Study after story after column will laud these “best damn kids in the world” as heralding a resurgent American greatness. And, for a while at least, no one will talk about a generation gap. Constantly stepping into post-Broom desert-scapes and suffering because of it, Thirteeners see Boomers as a generation that was given everything---from a Happy Days present to a Tomorrowland future---and then threw it away.

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Historically, the generation gap has been defined by different cultural tastes—in music, fashion, or technology—between older and younger age cohorts. But the new demographic divide has broader implications for social programs and education spending for youth. Will America’s elderly support initiatives for a youth population that is racially mixed? Racial and Ethnic Divisions Increase, Temporarily.