
12-2009

Editor's Notebook: The Millennials

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Recommended Citation

Kryzanek, Michael (2009). Editor's Notebook: The Millennials. *Bridgewater Review*, 28(2), 2.

Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol28/iss2/4

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Editor's Notebook

The Millennials

During the Vietnam War the term “generation gap” gained prominence as older Americans collided with the youth of this country over the war and ancillary concerns such as sexual permissiveness, drug use, and non-conformist rebellion.

In most cases, father and son, mother and daughter fought over politics, morals, and lifestyle.

In far too many cases, this collision of generations caused long running family feuds and separations.

Today, there is another “generation gap” developing between the youth of the 1970s and their children and grandchildren. The Millennial Generation, those born between 1980 and 2001, have shown themselves to be quite different from their parents and grandparents on everything from hot button issues such as abortion, gay marriage and racial inter-marriage to health care reform, climate change and defense spending. Polling data from numerous sources point to the Millennials as a liberal’s dream as many of the responses to questions of public policy, morality and lifestyle are clearly on the left side of the political spectrum.

The Millennial Generation supports choice and gay marriage and wonders what all the fuss is about concerning race in America. On health care reform the Millennials are foursquare for major changes that guarantee health care including government involvement; on climate change there is solid support for dealing quickly with the sources of global warming; and in defense spending this generation of young people is concerned that spending on war diminishes resources for domestic needs.

But besides leaning to the left, the Millennial Generation is beginning to wake up from its long political apathetic nap that has lasted since the Watergate era in the Nixon years. There is now evidence of more political discussions among the young and more interest in matters in the public domain. As many electoral



experts are quick to point out, the Millennials were key players in putting Barack Obama in the White House as they not only agreed with his campaign platform, but also his connection to their generation.

What is perhaps most interesting about the Millennial Generation is that many of them feel it is vitally important to participate in their community either by volunteering for worthy causes or becoming involved in small groups or clubs that perform some sort of public service, including what is commonly called “paying it forward.” If there is a difference here from past generations, the Millennial’s service activity is not that closely tied to organized religious organizations, as this new generation is much more secular than their parents and grandparents. Staying away from

church on Sundays, but doing good in the community separates this generation from those that have come before them.

As a classroom instructor, I see the Millennials everyday. They may dress differently than students from ten or twenty years ago, and they certainly know how to communicate with the latest technology. But like past generations, the Millennials are a mix of apprehension about their immediate future yet decidedly hopeful that in the end all will work out whether it is a job, a relationship or economic security. Despite the meltdown and the Great Recession, there remains in the Millennials that old American optimism and confidence in the future that has defined this nation for generation after generation.

There is a natural competition among generations as one looks at the other and finds fault or disappointment. The World War II Generation was the “Greatest” and saved the world from fascism; the Baby Boomer/Vietnam War Generation brought this country civil rights, women’s rights and a healthy skepticism about the excesses of governmental power. The Millennial Generation may go down in history as the Americans who embraced diversity, privacy rights, community service and the use of government to fix the problems left unsolved by previous generations.

—Michael Kryzanek is Editor of the Bridgewater Review.