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Editor's Notebook: Bridging the Generation Gap - Again

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Bridging The Generation Gap - Again

Michael J. Kryzanek

After twenty-one years spent in the midwest, I came of age in Massachusetts during those dark but exhilarating days of Vietnam, Watergate and domestic unrest. Although I was a graduate of that now famous high school class of 1965, I never really thought of myself back then as being part of America's revolutionary generation. But after one year in graduate school I found myself carrying a sign which read "Free Huey Newton" and going to protest rallies to end the war. Mind you, I was no flaming radical or card carrying member of the peace movement, but the times and the public environment changed me, as it did many others who lived through that era.

Looking back now to a time over twenty years ago when words like "relevance," "commitment," and "involvement" were heard on college campuses with great frequency and forcefulness, I am drawn to a comparison with the young men and women who sit in class before me and listen to my lectures on politics. How does this generation of college students match up to my generation? Have the same values and concerns that prompted my generation to get involved been passed down? Was the generation of the 60's unique in the way it responded to crisis in this country or do those of us who are now in our 40's make too much of our social activism and political heroics?

Despite the seemingly endless array of problems and controversies that arose in that period, the 60's were also a time of endless opportunities -- opportunities for young people to challenge preconceived notions about the world they live in; opportunities to participate in a dynamic process of social change; opportunities to face danger or at least one's conscience. Not every generation is given such opportunities to test themselves or to find their place in the world. Those young men and women who became part of the post-World War II college generation, for example, will be most remembered not for their political voices or values, but rather for souped up cars, phone booth stuffing, rock and roll and panty raids.



In many respects today's college students face a similar lack of opportunities to reach out of themselves. Granted that world hunger, apartheid, and the war in Central America have stimulated Live-Aid, calls for divestment of stock portfolios by colleges and an occasional demonstration against the contras, but by and large the problems of the 80's are far from home and have little direct bearing on the daily lives and futures of America's youth. With no serious national threat or crisis to force them out of their lethargy, the generation of the 80's has appeared to concentrate its energies on sex, money, sports, and MTV.

Although the students of the 60's will be remembered for their activism and social conscience, it is important to recall that many of them paid little attention to political wrongdoing or economic injustice. Campus strikes were often used as an excuse to cut classes and avoid term papers, and demonstrations against the Vietnam war were supported not only because of moral outrage, but for more selfish reasons such as the prospect of being shot. Yes, idealism, conscience and a concern for others existed in 60's students, but along with these virtues my generation also revealed a nasty sense of intolerance, a failure to understand

the personal ramifications of public actions, a blind acceptance of protest leaders and a sad unwillingness to see the good that this country has to offer. Along with its high ideals and morals, my generation also acquired healthy doses of cynicism, permissiveness and an eventual overarching concern for self.

The 80's generation is criticized as more interested in personal and career growth than those of us who still identify with the Tet offensive, the March on Washington and the protest songs of Joan Baez. To a member of the 60's generation the twenty year olds of today seem ignorant of recent history, hopelessly immersed in popular culture and too busy making money to turn their attention to the problems of their community, their country and their world. And yet I think that those of us who came out of the 60's should not be too harsh on the current student population. Their materialistic savvy gives them a much better understanding of how to survive in this difficult world; they are harder workers (although unfortunately much of their energy is directed toward non-academic pursuits); and they know how to enjoy life and are willing to laugh at themselves. Perhaps most importantly, though, they are surprisingly confident about the future of mankind and the planet. Compared to the "gloom and doomers" of the 60's, the generation of the 80's glows with renewed confidence.

If the social commitment and political awareness that were the hallmarks of the 60's seem to be absent today, the cause may be that fewer challenging opportunities exist. This generation has not had the chance to realize that what happens outside of their world does affect them and that they have an obligation to try and do something about it. Yet it is critically important that they, like their 60's predecessors, become aware of the evils of unchecked power, the necessity of insuring that democracy remains a system of popular rule and the responsibility of good citizens to see to it that the American dream becomes a reality for everyone.