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Book Review: Generations and Centuries Pass Away

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The millennium approaches and with it an apparent desire on the part of some to look back over the 20th century and place it on an historical scale. Tom Brokaw, the NBC nightly news anchor, chooses to evaluate the century through the eyes of the generation born in and around 1920, raised during the Depression, and brought into adulthood during WWII. These Americans he calls the 'greatest generation.' Peter Jennings and Todd Brewster in The Century take a wider view and chronicle the century's events and achievements in a lavishly and profusely illustrated volume designed to complement the TV series which recently ran on ABC network stations. Both books allow some insight into how well known commentators understand the history they have watched and reported.

Brokaw calls The Greatest Generation "a small gesture of personal appreciation." Brokaw tells us that he conceived the idea for his book on his 1994 trip to Normandy to report the 50th anniversary of the Allied invasion. Talking with veterans of June 6, 1944, he realized how many of the veterans, most in their sixties and seventies, retained vivid memories of what had happened to them and their comrades on that day. His book, therefore, collects oral histories of men and women, some well-known, most ordinary citizens, who, he says, belong to "the greatest generation any society has produced." Some sentences later Brokaw characterizes the WWII generation as one that "by and large, made no demands of homage from those who followed and prospered economically, politically, and culturally because of its sacrifices. It is a generation of towering achievement and modest demeanor, a legacy of their formative years when they were participants in and witnesses to sacrifices of the highest order."

"Service, sacrifice, and heroics": these are Brokaw's touchstones for the greatest generation, these and his frequent references to its work ethic and can-do optimism. The individual stories display these qualities in abundance; the tellers can hardly be criticized for their response to what they were called upon to do. Enmeshed within a huge and horrible war machine they hardly had a choice. Their stories as Brokaw relates them highlight luck and survival, obstacles—sometimes horrible wounds and disfigurement—overcome, and determination to construct a life, free insofar as possible, from the terrors of their early adulthood.

Collectively, however, the stories create a different impression. Brokaw, writing in the May/June 1999 issue of Modern Maturity (whose audience certainly comprises large numbers of the generation he praises), asserts that "the children of the WWII generation, by and large, have never known really hard times. The American economy has been expanding since the war ended and that, in turn, has given birth to a long run of instant gratification in American society." This assertion interprets hard times solely in terms of the nightly Dow-Jones average and implies that the post-war generation, having never known "really hard times," somehow doesn't quite measure up to the standard of "service, sacrifice, and heroics" set by its parents.

Brokaw's "gesture of personal appreciation" is not history but hagiography and, as such, his beatification of the WWII generation rests on two troublesome and troubling premises. The first holds that becoming fully adult requires forging in the fire, real or symbolic, of conflict and battle. Those who have survived the battlefield know what's required for becoming a man. Hindsight may cause one to attribute his survival to accomplished and heroic action, but as so many of Brokaw's individual voices testify, survival on the modern battlefield is purely a matter of luck. Still, cumulatively, Brokaw's portraits suggest that tempering in the fiery furnace produces more courageous, more determined, more complete humans.

Curiously, this view popped up a few years ago in an inverted way when Christopher Buckley argued in an Esquire article that those men of the post WWII generation—those born 1940 and after in Brokaw's generational tables—who hadn't served in Vietnam in the late 60s and 70s a decade later felt something missing in their lives, a sense that they hadn't shared their generation's formative experience. Columnist Bob Greene picked up the theme and stated outright that a feeling of guilt and of being less worthy had come over many of those who hadn't answered the call to serve in Indochina. Such feelings perhaps underlie the antipathy felt by many in the WWII generation toward President Clinton in his capacity as commander-in-chief. One need not belabor the point that such trial by fire theories of human development and historical causality, while they might have been appropriate for a long past heroic age, serve only to make our fin de siecle more dangerous.
Brokaw’s assertion that the post-WWII generation—mine—doesn’t know how easy their lives have been compared to those of their parents suggests that the older generation harbors some resentment toward their offspring. Again, Brokaw’s individuals underscore the virtue of hard work, discipline, and perseverance. In the aggregate, however, they convey a sense that the younger generation believes it enjoys an entitlement to all the prosperity created for them by their parents. Brokaw’s comment that the children have never really experienced hard times defines hard times solely in economic terms and downplays the fact that from 1965 to 1974 hard times took on a rather more complex political and intellectual cast. No one who lived through the confrontations and upheavals brought about by the Vietnam War would label those times “easy.” The WWII generation may have fought—in their terms—the “right” war or the “good” war; they asked their children to fight a horrible war. Perhaps some refused to fight in order to enjoy their entitlements. Many others refused out of an awareness that “service, sacrifice, and heroics” in an unworthy cause drained citizenship of significance.

The narrative proceeds from John Kennedy’s confrontation with Castro’s Cuba through the Civil Rights movement to the Dallas assassination. These events, the authors claim, produced youth that witnessed a “senseless adult world” against which they developed a counterculture. “Millions of young people were beginning to regard themselves as a class separate from mainstream society. They had been told since childhood that their generation was different, that they were the inheritors of the free world that the previous generation had fought to create, that they would grow up in prosperity with the best humanity could provide them, that they, too, would become great. Now they were about to turn that idea on its head.” The generations clash again.

Sex, drugs, rock and roll, and Vietnam fueled the despair the youth culture expressed toward the American government, or so Jennings and Brewster would have it. Yet, like the youth they chronicle, they don’t quite know what to make of the tumultuous events and end this pivotal chapter with Neil Armstrong’s 1969 moonwalk. “At home,” they say, “no matter where you stood, the sixties looked messy and unreadable.” From the moon, however, “the planet projected a picture of harmony, an essentially beautiful orb, ordered and still.” Such are the wonders of the zoom lens.

Reading The Century and remembering the images emphasizes that we have indeed lived in interesting times. Still, one looks in these books for some sense of connectedness, some sense that those who came before needn’t be considered saints compared to those who followed, that the generations are as much parallel and continuous as opposed. The reader should perhaps bring to these books a certain wariness toward permitting celebrity TV anchors to organize our history for us. Making connections among the welter of images they televise for us nightly isn’t exactly their strong suit. Dan Rather, to offer a recent example, reported on early May’s tornadoes in Oklahoma and finished his account by observing that the storm damage went “beyond any scale of destruction.” Had he, I wondered, been attending to his newscasts for the previous month with their nightly reports of NATO bombing in Yugoslavia and Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo? What scale of destruction measured this human suffering? And on what scale of destruction do we place the two adolescent boys, members of a new countercultural generation, who scoured their Colorado high school? The twentieth century is over but its legacy of human destruction and generational conflict remains with us as a new generation and century come. The millennium approaches.

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