

Generations In America

by David C. Grabbe

Forerunner, "WorldWatch," May 2005

The well-known book, *The Fourth Turning*, by Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, has given rise to many commentators and analysts looking at the present culture from a generational point of view to catch a glimpse of the future. The present state of the "generations," while perhaps inconclusive with regard to future events, demonstrates that the generational forecasts have not been far off.

The Baby Boomers (*born 1943-1960*)

Columnist Jay Bryant, writing for Townhall.com, takes note of "the centrality of the baby boom cohort to our national life during its remarkable cycle of existence" in his column entitled *The Last Boomer Battle* (March 29, 2005). He contends, "... almost everything has been all about the boomers since approximately nine months following the end of World War II." For examples, he points out that the birth control pill was invented when Boomers were teenagers, and Viagra appeared when they hit 50. Boomers protested to have the legal drinking age lowered from 21 to 18, yet when their own children approached adolescence, young Boomer parents campaigned to have it raised again.

Bryant also posits that abortion is a Baby Boomer issue: "Sexually liberated" Boomer women shaped the feminist agenda—at the heart of which is the "right" to destroy the unintended consequences of sexual liberation—and compliant Boomer men, for their own selfish reasons, saw no reason to oppose them. However, popular momentum is now moving against the pro-abortion forces. Bryant observes, "Because most of today's boomer women are post-menopausal, and while they may still believe the ideological arguments fashioned to support their position, the urgency of the matter has faded—as has the stamina to undertake rigorous political action such as marching all day in the hot Washington sun."

Bryant suggests that the "last boomer battle" may be the one regarding euthanasia:

The same demographic and scientific forces behind the ebbing of abortion as a hot-button political issue make it certain that euthanasia will move front and center in the public consciousness. The oldest boomers will be sixty next year, and the case of Terri Schindler Schiavo notwithstanding, euthanasia is an issue about old people.

The Thirteenth Generation (*born 1961-1981*)

Howe and Strauss show that members of this generation typically are not movers and shakers like Boomers. *The Fourth Turning* says of them, "In childhood, the indulged Boomers were replaced by the neglected *13th Generation* . . . who were left unprotected at a time of cultural convulsion and adult self-discovery. Known in pop culture as Generation X, its name here reflects the fact that it is literally the thirteenth generation to call itself American" (p. 17). However, the authors forecast that, as this generation ages, it will take steps to outgrow its youthful selfishness and indiscretions, and even tend toward conservatism.

An annual survey by the Barna Group seems to support this. The *State of the Church: 2005* compares people's religious beliefs and practices to levels measured in identical national surveys conducted by Barna since 1991. While very little change has been measured in most areas for the past 15 years, the survey shows a surprising and significant increase in Bible reading. According to Barna, 45% of adults read the Bible during a typical week (not including when they are at church), up from 31% in 1995. Barna concludes that this increase is largely attributable to an increase in Bible reading by Baby Busters—the Thirteenth Generation, Gen Xers—who are now between the ages of 24 and 44. While it is still uncertain whether this upward trend will have any great effect on the culture at large, it is at least a significant footnote.

The Millennials (*born 1982-2000*)

According to Howe and Strauss, this generation, also known as Generation Y, is the one that will lead society following the Crisis forecast to commence in roughly 2005-2008, based on the cycles of Anglo-American history for the last 600 years. What the nation looks like on the other side of the Crisis will largely depend on how this generation responds to it. *The Fourth Turning* says this generation "grows up as increasingly protected post-Awakening children, comes of age as the heroic young teamworkers of a Crisis. . . ."

Reboot, a Jewish group that examines generational issues, released a study on April 11, 2005, entitled, "OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era." The study, reported by *The Washington Times* (April 12, 2005), indicates that this generation is technically savvy and tends toward individuality when it comes to personal choice (i.e. styles, music, even religious beliefs). However, even as it prefers a smorgasbord of choice, it is also much more likely to accept others of differing background (whether ethnic or religious). For example, according to the study, only 7% of Millennials said that "all" their friends were of the same religion. Significantly, while many in this generation are concerned about good grades and finding work after school, their biggest concern is the solidly "moral" issue of sex outside marriage.

Even this brief analysis exposes the reality of "generation gaps," which are major factors in societal turmoil. Each age group, using its own characteristic approach to life and childrearing, raises a generation very different from itself—and these differences often prove to be significant factors in bringing on the "Crisis." To use Howe and Strauss' terms, the "unraveling" of society is far advanced, society has "awakened" to many of its problems, and the next Crisis is due. All that remains to be determined is what form the Crisis takes and how the generations react to it.

Exciting times appear to be just ahead.