A New Generation of Americans

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According to a recent national survey, barely one adult in three thinks that today’s kids, once grown, will make the world a better place. To believe the newspapers, you’d suppose our schools are full of kids who can’t read in the classroom, shoot one another in the hallways, spend their loose change on tongue rings, and couldn’t care less who runs the country. A few years ago, in an otherwise positive campaign by Apple Computer featuring true-to-life adults, a teenage girl was depicted as stoned, clueless, and scarcely able to put two words together. Not surprisingly, she had twenty- and thirtysomething “fan clubs” talking about her “authenticity”—betraying an underlying cynical contempt for the young.

How depressing. And how wrong.

Current youth indicators reveal attitudes and behaviors among today’s teens that represent something very new and unfamiliar.

They’re optimists. Nine in ten describe themselves as “happy,” “confident,” and “positive.” Teen suicide rates are declining for the first time in the postwar era. A rapidly decreasing share of teenagers worry about violence, sex, or drugs, and an increasing share say that growing up is easier for them than it was for their parents.

They’re rule-followers. Over the past ten years, rates of violent crime among teens has fallen by 70 percent, rates of teen pregnancy and abortion by 40 percent, rates of high school sexual activity by 15 percent, and rates of alcohol and tobacco consumption are reaching all-time lows. As public attention to school shootings has risen, their actual incidence has fallen. Even including such shootings as Columbine, there have been fewer than half as many killings of students by students on school property since 2000 (averaging around ten per year) as there were in the early ’90s (over forty killings per year).
They’re gravitating toward group activity. Twenty years ago, community service was rare in most high schools. Today, it is the norm, having more than tripled since 1984, according to the US Department of Education. A 1999 Roper survey found that more teenagers blamed “selfishness” than anything else when asked about “the major cause of problems in this country.”

They trust and accept authority. Most teens say they identify with their parents’ values, and more than nine in ten say they “trust” and “feel close to” their parents. A recent survey found 82 percent of teens reporting “no problems” with any family member—versus just 48 percent who said that back in 1974, when parents and teens were far more likely to argue and oppose one another’s basic values. Half say they trust government to do what’s right all or most of the time—twice the share of older people answering the same question in the same poll. Large majorities of teens favor tougher rules against misbehavior in the classroom and society at large.

They’re the most watched-over generation in memory. The typical day of many a child, tween, or teen has become a nonstop round of parents, relatives, teachers, coaches, babysitters, counselors, chaperones, minivans, surveillance cams, and curfews. Whether affluent or not, kids have become more closely managed. Since the mid-‘80s, “unstructured activity” has been the most rapidly declining use of time among preteens.

They’re smart. Since the late ‘80s, grade school aptitude test scores have been rising or (at least) flat across all subjects and all racial and ethnic groups. The number of high school students who take and pass an Advanced Placement test has more than doubled in the past ten years. Fully 73 percent of high school students today say they want a four-year college degree. A growing share is taking the SAT.

Even so, the average SAT score is the highest in thirty years. Eight in ten teenagers now say it’s “cool to be smart.”
Not all Millennials reveal these traits, of course. Every generation has all kinds of people, but so too does every generation have core traits that drive new trends and construct a new overall persona.

These Millennial traits reflect the fact that this generation was, from the start, more wanted than the one that came before. Born in an era when Americans showed a more positive attitude toward children, the Millennials are the product of a birthrate reversal. During the Gen Xer childhood, planned parenting meant contraceptives. During the Millennial childhood, it has meant visits to the fertility clinic. In 1998, the number of US children surged past its previous Baby Boom peak. Over the next decade, college freshmen enrollment is due to grow by roughly 40,000 per year.

Once you appreciate how Millennials have been regarded as special since birth and have been more obsessed-over at every age than Gen Xers, recent adult trends come into sharper focus. Falling divorce and abortion rates begin to make sense. You can understand why harms against children (from child abuse and high school gunfire to bloody video games and child kidnappings) are far less tolerable today than twenty years ago. You can clue in to why nearly every political issue of the '90s was recast as what newsweeklies call “kinderpolitics,” as in: If it’s good for children, do it—and if it isn’t, don’t. Year by year, for officeholders in both parties and at all levels, America’s kids became not just a political trump card, but something like public property.

The Millennial Location in History

One way to define a generation’s location in history is to think of a turning point in the national memory that its earliest birth cohorts just missed. Boomers, for example, are the generation whose eldest members have no memory of VJ Day. Gen Xers are the generation whose eldest members have no memory of John
Kennedy’s assassination. Millennials are the generation whose eldest members have no memory of sitting in school watching the space shuttle Challenger disintegrate.

Let’s trace the historical location of each of the generations described earlier.

The Silent (born 1925 to 1942) arrived during the Great Depression and World War II, events they witnessed through the eyes of childhood, tending their Victory Gardens, while the next older GI generation built and sailed in the Victory Ships that won the war.

Boomers (born 1943 to 1960) arrived during the “Great American High” that followed the war, a childhood era of warmth and indulgence that marked them forever as a “postwar” generation, while the next older Silent compliantly entered the suburban and corporate world.


Millennials (born 1982 and after) arrived during the recent era of the “Culture Wars,” while Gen Xers embarked on their young-adult dotcom entrepreneurialism.

America could now be entering a new post-9/11 era. How the “War on Terror” will affect Millennials over time, as they become young adults, is a matter of speculation. So far, the mood is reinforcing several Millennial traits and desires that were already apparent—including their orientation toward personal safety, family closeness, community action, applied high-tech, and long-term planning.

Millennials live in a world that has taken trends Boomers recall from their childhood and turned them upside down. Boomers can recall growing up with a homogenizing popular culture and a wide gender-role gap in an era when community came first and family stability was strong (though starting to weaken). Millennials have grown up with a fragmenting pop culture and a narrow gender-role gap in an era when individuals came first and when family stability was weak (though starting to strengthen).
As a postwar generation, Boomers arrived just when uniting, conforming, and building communities seemed the nation’s logical priority. As a post-awakening generation, Millennials began to arrive just when diverging, liberating, and building strong lives as individuals seemed preferable. Such reversals reflect a fundamental difference in the two generations’ location in history.

Millennials also represent a sharp break from Generation X. Gen Xers can recall growing up as children during the ’60s and ’70s, one of the most passionate eras of social dissent and cultural upheaval in American history, an era in which the needs of children were often overlooked or discounted. All this has left a deep impression on most of today’s young Gen-X adults.

But Millennials can recall none of it. They have no personal memory of the ordered Cold War world (when only large and powerful governments had weapons of mass destruction). They only know about a post-Cold War era of multilateral confusion and power vacuums (when terrorists and rogue states are seeking these weapons). This generation has been shaped by such formative collective experiences as Waco, Oklahoma City, Columbine, the World Trade Center, and now 9/11 and the War on Terror. In all these instances, the real danger seems to come not from out-of-control institutions, but from out-of-control individuals, or small groups of conspirators, who have become a menace to humanity because national or global institutions are not strong enough to control or even monitor them.

For young Boomers, untethered individuals were the solution. For Millennials, they are more likely to be the problem.

How Boomers and Gen Xers have responded to their own location in history is a story that is mostly written, a story replete with ironies and paradoxes. How Millennials will respond to theirs is a drama waiting to unfold. Yet if you know what to look for and why, certain themes in this drama can be anticipated, and their implications pondered.
How Millennials Will “Rebel”

Over 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that in America “each new generation is a new people.” The question arises: Does some pattern or dynamic determine how each generation will be new?

Yes.

Three basic rules apply to any rising generation in nontraditional societies, like America, that allow young people some freedom to redefine what it means to be young, and to prod older people to change social mores—in other words, to “rebel.”

· First, each rising generation breaks with the styles and attitudes of the young-adult generation, which no longer functions well in the new era.
· Second, each rising generation corrects for what it perceives as the excesses of the current midlife generation—their parents and leaders—sometimes as a protest, other times with the implicit support of parents and leaders who seek to correct the deficiencies of the adult world.
· Third, each rising generation fills the social role being vacated by the departing elder generation, a role that now feels fresh, functional, desirable, even necessary for a society’s wellbeing. Through the living memory of everyone else, this dying generation has filled a social role so firmly as to prevent others from claiming it. Now, with its passing, it’s available again to the young.

When you apply these rules to the generational dynamic in America, you can see what’s been happening, and will continue to happen even more powerfully, with Millennials.

*Millennials will rebel against Gen-X styles and attitudes, correct for Boomer excesses, and fill the role vacated by the GIs.*
Stylistically, today’s teens are breaking with today’s thirtyish Gen Xers and the whole “X” (and “X-treme”) attitude. Expect teamwork instead of free agents, political action instead of apathy, technology to elevate the community and not the individual, on-your-side teamwork in place of in-your-face sass.

Gen Xers in their late twenties and thirties often regard themselves as the trendsetters of the teen culture, but often they know little about what actually goes on there. After all, they haven’t seen the inside of a high school in many years. So they fall out of touch and, in time, a new batch of teenagers breaks with their culture. This happened in the early ’60s, again in the early ’80s, and it’s starting to happen again.

Meanwhile, Millennials will correct for what teens see as the excesses of today’s middle-aged Boomers: narcissism, impatience, iconoclasm, and a constant focus on talk (usually argument) over action. In their “rebellion,” Millennials will opt for the good of the group, patience, conformism, and a new focus on deeds over words. When they argue among themselves, they will value finding consensus more than being right. When they argue with older generations, they will try to persuade by showing how more than by explaining why. With adults of all philosophical stripes yearning for “community,” the Millennial solution will be to set high standards, get organized, team up, and actually create a community. Unlike Boomers, Millennials won’t bother spending three days at a retreat to figure out how to rewrite a mission statement.

The third rule of rebellion may be the key to understanding not just what Millennials are now doing, but where they see their clearest path in the years ahead.

Remember those whom Tom Brokaw christened the “greatest generation”—the ones who pulled America out of Depression, joined unions, conquered half the globe as soldiers, unleashed nuclear power, founded suburbia, and took mankind to the moon. The most important link this “GI Generation”
has to today’s teens is in the void they leave behind: No other adult peer group possesses anything close to their upbeat, high-achieving, team-playing, and civic-minded reputation. Sensing this social role unfilled, today’s adults have been teaching these (GI) values to Millennials, who now sense the GI “archetype” as the only available script for correcting or complementing the Boomer persona.

In his 2001 *Atlantic Monthly* cover story, David Brooks gave the label “Organization Kids” to these Millennials, a tacit reference to the original GI “Organization Man” and about as far as you can get from the “Bourgeois Bohemians” (or “Bobos”) Brooks finds so common among today’s middle-aged. Today’s Millennial teens often identify the GIs as their grandparents. When asked in surveys to assess the reputations of older generations, Millennials now in college say they have a much higher opinion of GIs and a somewhat lower one of “Generation X” than they do of either generation in-between—Boomers (the children of the postwar American High) or the Silent (the children of World War II). Many speak glowingly about GIs as men and women who “did great things” and “brought us together as a nation.”

Today’s teens don’t rebel against midlife Boomers by being hyper-Xers—not when the oldest Xers are themselves entering their mid-forties. They rebel by being GI redux, a youthful update of the generation against which the Boomers fought thirty years ago. No one under the age of seventy has any direct memory of teens, or twentysomethings, who are GI in spirit. Millennials are, and will be. That’s why what’s around the cultural corner is so profound that it might better be called a youth revolution. Rebellions peter out—but revolutions produce long-term social change.

**Millennial Origins**

Recall the last twenty years of American childhood. If you’re a Boomer, this era may seem like only yesterday, because you may recall it as a
parent. If you’re a Gen Xer, in all likelihood, you will know this era through a cloudier prism, since you were neither a child nor were raising children yourself.

The February 22, 1982 issue of *Time* published a cover story about an array of thirtysomething Boomers choosing (finally) to become moms and dads. This same year, bright yellow “Baby on Board” signs began popping up on the windows of minivans, a newfangled “family oriented” vehicle.

In the 1983 holiday season, adult America fell in love with Cabbage Patch Kids—a precious new doll, harvested pure from nature, so wrinkly and cuddly-cute that millions of Boomers wanted to take one home to love. Better yet, why not produce your own genuine, live Millennial?

After twenty years of wanting more distance between themselves and their children, new parents now wanted closeness. From 1974 to 1990, the share of fathers present at the birth of their children rose from 27 to 80 percent—an historic shift helped along by hundreds of Lamaze teachers. By 1990, the “attachment parenting” childrearing style of William and Martha Sears became the vogue.

The *era of the wanted child* had begun.

In September 1982, the first Tylenol scare led to parental panic over trick-or-treating. Halloween suddenly became a night not merely of celebrating silly scary things, but also of hotlines, advisories, and statutes—a fate that soon befell many other once-innocent child pastimes, from bicycle-riding to BB guns.

A few months later came national hysteria over the sexual abuse of toddlers, leading to dozens of adult convictions after what skeptics liken to Salem-style trials.

All the while, several influential new books (*The Disappearance of Childhood*, *Children without Childhood*, *Our Endangered Children*) assailed the “anything goes” parental treatment of children since the mid-'60s. Those days were ending. The family, school, and neighborhood wagons were circling.

The *era of the protected child* had begun.
In the early ’80s, the national rates for many behaviors damaging to children—divorce, abortion, violent crime, alcohol intake, and drug abuse—reached their post-war high-water mark. The well-being of children began to dominate the national debate over most family issues: welfare, latchkey households, drugs, pornography.

In 1983, the federal Nation at Risk report on education blasted America’s K–12 students as “a rising tide of mediocrity,” prompting editorialists to implore teachers and adults to do better by the next batch of kids.

In 1984, Children of the Corn and Firestarter bombed at the box office. These were merely the latest installments in a child-horror film genre that had been popular and profitable for well over a decade, ever since Rosemary’s Baby and The Exorcist. But parents suddenly didn’t want to see them. Instead, they begin flocking to a new kind of movie (Baby Boom, Parenthood, Three Men and a Baby) about adorable babies, wonderful tykes, and adults who would themselves become better people by choosing to look after them.

The era of the worthy child had begun.

In 1990, the Wall Street Journal headline—“The ’60s Generation, Once High on Drugs, Warns Its Children”—was echoed by the New York Times: “Do As I Say, Not As I Did.” Polls showed that Boomer parents did not want their own children to have the same freedom with drugs, alcohol, and sex that they themselves had once enjoyed.

By the early ’90s, elementary-school kids were in the spotlight. During the Gulf War Super Bowl of 1991, children marched onto the field at halftime amid heavy media coverage (unseen during the Vietnam War) of the children of dads serving abroad.

Between 1986 and ’91, the number of periodicals offered to young children doubled, and between 1991 and ’94, the sale of children’s music also doubled. In tot-TV fare, “Barney and Friends” (featuring teamwork and what
kids have in common) stole the limelight from “Sesame Street” (featuring individualism and what makes each kid unique).

During 1996, major-party nominees Dole and Clinton dueled for the presidency amid much talk about “soccer moms” and the safety of young teens (smoking, curfews, limitations on first-time drivers licenses).

During 1997, Millennials began to make an impression on the pop culture. Thanks to the Spice Girls, Hanson, and others, a whole new musical sound appeared—happier, brighter, more innocent. “They like brands with heritage. Contrived, hard-edged fashion is dead. Attitude is over,” MTV president Judy McGrath said of her company’s new teen interns. “They like what’s nice and fun in fashion and sports. They like the Baby Gap ads. They’re simple and sweet.”

The era of the perfected child had begun.

Actually, those MTV interns were late Xers, born a little before 1980. But the big change—the revolution in youth—is coming from those 1982–86 birth cohorts. Other key trends await the Millennials’ second wave, born later in the ’80s. Test scores, though improving gradually for first-wavers, are likely to ramp up steeply once today’s heavily homeworked, super-tested tweens enter high school. By the time the preteens of 2001 reach college age, and campuses are a hotbed of Millennial styles, the true Millennial persona will reveal itself in full force.

Boomers started out as the objects of loosening child standards in an era of conformist adults. Millennials have started out as the objects of tightening child standards in an era of nonconformist adults. By the time the last Millennials come of age, they could become the best-educated youths in American history, and the best-behaved young adults in living memory. But they may also have a tendency toward copying, consensus, and conformity that educators will want to challenge, as well as many other new personality traits that will require broad changes in the world of higher education.
Through the late ’90s, these same much-watched children passed through high school, accompanied by enormous parental, educational, and media fascination—and headlines, not all of them positive. After the April 1999 Columbine tragedy was replayed again and again on the news, this adult absorption with Millennial safety, achievement, and morality reached a fever pitch. Eighteen months after Columbine, these wanted, protected, worthy, perfected children began entering college.

Twenty years ago, the arrival of Generation X on campus took many institutions of higher learning by surprise. Professors and administrators began noticing that incoming students were less interested in the protest movements that had driven college life throughout the ’60s and ’70s.

The Gen-X attitude toward knowledge was more instrumental. In history classes, students were less likely to ask about which wars were moral than about how you win one. The most highly motivated students gathered in professional schools, where the object was less to change the world than to enable grads to make a lot of money. A good student was one who could get the best transcript with least possible expenditure of effort—a bottom-line focus which Gen Xers maintained as entry-level workers in the late ’80s and ’90s, with wondrous consequences for the economy’s productivity.

Institutions of higher learning had to adjust to fit this style of student. In loco parentis, already under assault during the ’60s and ’70s, virtually disappeared. Pass/fail grading options became available for many if not most classes, and core curricula requirements relaxed. Widespread use of drug and alcohol forced colleges and universities to build new relationships with local police. Speech codes were enacted to counter uncivil discourse. Large, school-wide events became less common as cynicism about school spirit and campus community spread. Students took longer to earn their degrees.
College clientele changed as well. More foreign, older, and “continuing education” students were enrolled. To meet shifting demand driven by changing economic conditions, business and law schools expanded, while science and engineering departments were increasingly the province of international students.

Now, with the arrival of the Millennials, campus life is undergoing another transformation. Policies needed to accommodate or manage college students in the ’80s and ’90s have become inappropriate. Instead, in the current decade, college administrators have been adjusting their institutions to a new crop of students who are:

· Close to their parents
· Focused on grades and performance
· Busy with extracurricular activities
· Eager to volunteer for community service
· Talented in technology
· More interested in math and science, relative to the humanities
· Insistent on a secure, regulated environment
· Respectful of norms and institutions
· Ethnically diverse, but less interested in questions of racial identity
· Majority female, but less interested in questions of gender identity

They also are very numerous and very intent on going to college, which are making these trends all the more consequential.

In the fall of 2004, the first Millennials entered law schools, medical schools, and others postgraduate programs. As they flood into the highest student reaches of academe, every aspect of university life is revealing a new young-adult mindset.

From Millennials and the Pop Culture:
Strategies for a New Generation of Consumers in Music, Movies, Television, the Internet, and Video Games (Great Falls, VA: LifeCourse Associates, 2006).
0 4 8 12 16 20
Rate per 100,000
Age 15–19 Age 20–24

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55
Rate per 1,000 Youths, 12–17
Offender Rate Victimization Rate
Note: Serious violent crimes are murders, rapes, robberies, and aggravated assaults.
a physical fight in the last 12 months

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2004)

Birth Rate

Abortion Rate

Pregnancy Rate

* 2000 for Pregnancies and Abortions

Source: NCHS (2005); Alan Guttmacher Institute (2004)