Boomer nation:
the largest and richest generation ever and how it changed America

Steve Gillon.

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# BOOMER NATION

THE LARGEST
AND RICHEST
GENERATION
EVER AND HOW IT
CHANGED
AMERICA

STEVE GILLON

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This book is dedicated to the memory of "Uncle Bill"—William G. Parker (1930–2003)

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## BOOMER NATION

(Please note: I have used endnotes for all references to primary and secondary materials. All other quotes are taken from author interviews.)

### INTRODUCTION

### THE LONG BOOM

America in 1958, "that every other young housewife I see is pregnant." The Baby Boom may have been obvious to everyone by 1958, but it caught most Americans by surprise when it started at the end of World War II. In 1946 the census's experts viewed the upsurge in births as temporary and predicted an increase of only 5 million for the rest of the decade. How wrong they were! In 1948 the nation's mothers gave birth to 4 million babies—a child was born every eight seconds. By the end of the decade nearly 9 million babies had been born. The census planners had miscalculated by over 50 percent. (By comparison, the pollsters who predicted Tom Dewey's victory over President Harry Truman in 1948 missed by only 5 percent.)

And the babies kept coming. In January 1953 General Electric announced that it would award five shares of stock to any employee who had a baby on October 15, the company's seventy-fifth anniversary. The company said it expected about 13 winners. Instead, 189 children were born on that day. By 1959 there were over 50 million children under the age of 14 living in the United States. Together they made up over 30 percent of the population. There were as many children in 1959 as there were people living in the United States in 1881. To keep track of the boom, the Commerce Department established a "census clock" in the lobby of its Washington, D.C., head-quarters. Multicolored flashing lights on the clock signaled a birth every 7½ seconds, a death every 20 seconds, the arrival of a new immigrant every 1½ minutes, and the departure of an emigrant every 20 minutes. The result was an increase in population of one person every 11 seconds.

The Baby Boom would prove to be the single greatest demographic event in American history—more significant, even, than the staggering loss of life during the Civil War. Boomers were so disproportionately numerous, so affluent, so blessed by the cold peace of

the Cold War (Vietnam notwithstanding) that they would have the motive, means, and opportunity to reshape the nation. How they did so, and what it means for America today, have been grossly misunderstood. The Boomers have been dismissed by many commentators as selfish or self-indulgent, a generation that never had to make the sacrifices of its predecessors in fighting a major war or battling a great depression; a generation that had too much sexual freedom, that invented the "me decade" of the 1970s, and that spent a small fortune on therapy and "self-actualization." But this stereotype is short-sighted and misses other very different trends that have also been Boomer driven—the explosion of new religious denominations and steady rise in churchgoing; the explosion of charitable giving; the explosion of entrepreneurship—all of which became most evident in the 1970s and 1980s as the Boomers rose to adulthood. Though they pushed the country toward liberalism when they were young, they pushed it right back to conservatism when they grew older. Beneath all the contradictions, there is a strong signal: they have reshaped an entire culture around their own single cohort.

Some saw it coming. Expectations of peace and prosperity were directly tied to the proliferation of future consumers. "Just imagine how much these extra people, these new markets, will absorb—in food, in clothing, in gadgets, in housing, in services," gushed Sylvia Porter. "Our factories must expand just to keep pace." In 1958 *Life* magazine called children the "Built-in Recession Cure," concluding that all babies were potential consumers who spearheaded "a brandnew market for food, clothing, and shelter." Signs in the New York City subway read: "Your future is great in a growing America. Every day 11,000 babies are born in America. This means new business, new jobs, new opportunities."

There has never been a simple or wholly satisfactory explanation of why the Boom occurred in the first place. One obvious reason was that young couples who had delayed getting married during World War II decided to make up for lost time. Yet as the decade progressed, the median age of those getting married hit historic lows—20.1 years for women and 22.5 for men. Young couples were starting families earlier and continuing to have children over a longer period of time. At the same time changing cultural attitudes toward sexuality and pregnancy created a "procreation ethic" that encouraged young cou-

ples to have children. Popular television shows and magazine stories celebrated the joys of pregnancy and motherhood, as did advertisers. "I'm Alice Cook," declared a suburban housewife in one aspirin commercial. "I have six children, and they come in all shapes and sizes. So do their colds." Perhaps people felt comfortable having more children while a growing economy buoyed their hopes for the future. The Serviceman's Readjustment Act, popularly known as the GI bill, which Congress passed in 1944, pumped millions of dollars into the economy by providing veterans with unemployment compensation, medical benefits, loans to start new business, and tuition benefits for continuing education. Certainly modern science contributed to the fertility euphoria by conquering diseases that had plagued people for centuries. Antibiotics and other new drugs subdued diseases such as tuberculosis, diphtheria, whooping cough, and measles. The most significant achievement was the victory over poliomyelitis (polio), most of whose victims were children. Between 1947 and 1951 this crippling disease struck an annual average of 39,000 Americans. In 1955 Dr. Jonas Salk of the Pittsburgh Medical School developed the first effective vaccine against polio, and by 1960 vaccines had practically eliminated the disease in the United States.

Yet if peace, prosperity, and health explained the Boom, it would have continued in spite of Vietnam (after all, Korea didn't even slow it down) and in spite of the Pill. It came to an end before feminism gave women an economic alternative to marriage and family. Perhaps, then, it was a cultural tipping point at which the causes coalesced just enough, and networks of individuals jumped on the bandwagon just enough, to launch a procreation fad that tipped back toward "normal" birthrates (and continued tipping lower than ever) only by 1964. It isn't a satisfying explanation, but some social phenomena are remarkably resistant to simple explanations.

American historians have neglected the importance of generations in history. "Among democratic nations," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s, "each new generation is a new people." In the 1930s the social scientist Karl Mannheim argued that decisive events in their early adult years could shape the consciousness of an entire generation. "Early impressions," Mannheim wrote, "tend to coalesce into a natural view of the world." More recently, in their book *Generations*, journalists William Strauss and Neil Howe attempted to divide four centuries

of American history into eighteen generations. They even claim that conflict between these recurring generations offers "an important explanation for why the story of America unfolds as it does" and a model for predicting the future. Of course it is not so simple—most generations do not have obvious beginnings and endings, nor do their members tend to view one another as fellow travelers.

Demographers themselves do not always agree on the exact dates or titles for each age group. In general most Americans living today fall into one of a handful of broad generational categories. The Depression and World War II were the defining experiences of the now famous "GI Generation," or "Greatest Generation," as the TV anchorman Tom Brokaw called them. Born before 1930, they represented about 16 percent of the adult population in 1998. Those born between 1930 and 1945 are often lumped together as the "Swing Generation" or occasionally split into a separate "War Babies" group born after 1941. Together they represent approximately 15 percent of adults. Boomers, usually dated between 1946 and 1964, account for about 39 percent of Americans over the age of 18 and 29 percent of the total population. They were followed by "Generation X," or the "Baby Busters" (1965–1976), who represent 22 percent of adults, and the Baby Boomlet, the children of the Boomers, born between 1977 and 1995.

Yet of all these groups, only the Boomers have the coherence and importance of a cohort defined by its age. The Depression and the war profoundly affected all Americans alive at the time. The incoherence of the Gen Xers, and the silly debates about what to call their successors, suggest that the birthdates of everyone under age 40 are not that useful in predicting their behavior or interests. But the Boom is an exception, thanks to its enormous size. It wrapped our culture around itself like no other generation before or since. While past generations have shared common experiences, they developed only a loose sense of generational identity. Largely because of their size and the emergence of mass media, especially television, Boomers are the first generation to have a defined sense of themselves as a single entity.

The Baby Boom's special status is derived first and foremost from its enormous size, especially in comparison to the smaller generations that came immediately before and after. Nearly 80 million American children were born between 1945 and 1964. The Swing generation that preceded the Boomers produced only 30 million. The widespread use of the Pill that began in 1964 reduced births for Generation X (1965–1977) to fewer than 45 million The result was a demographic spike in births that starts at the end of World War II and ends at the beginning of the Vietnam War.

It is not just their size that has made Boomers unique. Almost from the time they were conceived, Boomers were dissected, analyzed, and pitched to by modern marketers, who reinforced a sense of generational distinctiveness. "By pitching so many things to us all the time that were only and specifically for us, the mass media insisted that we mattered," Susan Douglas wrote about the experience of young girls growing up in the 1950s. "Once you're a market—especially a really big market-you can change history." The amount of money spent to advertise products doubled during the decade from \$6 billion to over \$12 billion. Toy companies led the way. In 1958, 64 toy manufacturers spent \$3.5 million on television ads. The following year, 121 companies spent \$6.5 million. By the end of the century, marketing budgets would be many times that amount. The Boomer era has witnessed and encouraged a marketing explosion far greater than the much-hyped birth of mass advertising in the early 20th century. By some estimates, children raised on shows like The Mickey Mouse Club and Howdy Doody saw more than 500 hours of ads by the age of 6. By the time they were age 21, most Boomers had seen more than 300,000 commercials.

Eugene Gilbert, who referred to himself as the Pied Piper of the Youth Market, did more than anyone else to target the Boomers even while they were young. "Our salient discovery is that within the past decade [1950s] the teen-agers have become a separate and distinct group in our society," he observed. His syndicated column, "What Young People Are Thinking," ran in more than 300 newspapers in the late 1950s. He collected and then sold to marketers information about the evolving teen consumers. Gilbert estimated that the average teenager had \$10 a week to spend in 1958 compared with \$2.50 in 1944 and that teens spent more than \$10 billion a year on products. He discovered that teenage girls annually spent \$20 million on lipstick, \$25 million on deodorant, and \$9 million on permanents. Male teenagers owned 2 million electric razors. Together they spent about \$75 million on pop records. Perhaps Gilbert's greatest insight

was that teenagers could convince their parents to purchase a new car or stylish clothing. Gilbert found that half of the 4 million kids who watched *Captain Kangaroo* went shopping with their mothers three times a week, and 80 percent of them pleaded with their mothers to buy products they had seen plugged on the show.

He was right, at least in general. Boomers would change America by serving as a target, a magnet, and an immovable object just as much as by their own actions. Their impact can be seen in something as simple as changing car fashions. In the 1950s Boomer parents purchased large cars, ideal for transporting small children. In the 1960s Boomers fresh out of high school wanted sporty Mustangs, which rolled off the production line for the first time in 1964, or unconventional Volkswagen Beetles. In the 1970s and 1980s struggling Boomers moved into their first jobs, and as they started families of their own, they looked to economical imports like the Toyota Corolla or the Honda Accord. In the 1990s manufacturers tried appealing directly to Boomer women with children by developing the minivan. (Boomers made up 61 percent of Chrysler minivan owners compared to 42 percent of passenger cars.) As their children grew up and left home, many Boomer men tried to reclaim their youth by purchasing more sporty cars, like the popular BMW Z3, marketed to 40- and 55-year-olds as a "weekend reward."

Boomers were raised in a period of unprecedented prosperity and unparalleled expectations about the future. America emerged from World War II with new military might and a desire to shape the world. Keynesian economics gave people the belief they had conquered the boom-and-bust cycle that had plagued societies in the past. Between 1940 and 1960 the gross national product (GNP) more than doubled, from \$227 billion to \$488 billion. The median family income rose from \$3,083 to \$5,657, and real wages climbed by almost 30 percent. By 1960 a record 66.5 million Americans held jobs. Unlike in earlier boom times, runaway prices did not eat up rising income: inflation averaged only 1.5 percent annually in the 1950s. "Never had so many people, anywhere, been so well off," the editors of *U.S. News & World Report* concluded in 1957.

Education played a central role in the development of a distinct Baby Boom culture. Many states passed mandatory school attendance laws after World War II in an effort to expose America's youth to middle-class values of respectability and hard work. In 1930 only 50 percent of children aged 14 to 17 were students. By 1950 the ratio increased to 73 percent. In response to the enormous demand for space, school districts rushed to open new schools and add on new classrooms. During the 1950s California opened one school every week. In 1954 alone more than 60,000 new classrooms were built. Instead of becoming "vast instruments of American democracy," as Harvard president James Bryant Conant said they would, American high schools provided a perfect breeding ground for a subversive "youth culture." Large new schools swelling with thousands of teenagers encouraged young people to look to their peers, and not their parents, for direction and approval. "Adolescents today are cut off, probably more than ever before, from the adult society," observed James Coleman in The Adolescent Society. "They are dumped into a society of their peers, whose habitats are the halls and classrooms of their schools, the teen-age canteens, the corner drugstore, the automobile." After swelling primary school playgrounds in the 1950s, Boomers overran college campuses in the 1960s, changing higher education along the way.

That youth culture found its most powerful expression in popular music. "Rock was a language that taught the baby boomers about themselves," observed Landon Jones, author of Great Expectations. The transistor radio allowed the new music to penetrate deep into teen culture. In 1954 "Rock Around the Clock," became, according to music critic Lillian Roxon, "the first assault to have a special secret defiant meaning for teenagers only. It was the first inkling teenagers had that they might be a force to be reckoned with in numbers alone. If there could be one song, there could be others; there would be a whole world of songs, and then a whole world." While Boomers were twisting their hips to the beat of "Jailhouse Rock," their older brothers and sisters were still swooning over Doris Day. Because it was so closely identified with teen culture, rock appeared more rebellious than it was during the 1950s, when most of the music still dealt with the familiar themes of romance and dance. It was during the 1960s that rock became the emblem of rebellion of the younger generation against the world their parents had created. "Hope I die before I get old," a lyric from The Who's "My Generation," was an apt rallying cry for a newly self-aware cohort.

The institution that solidified the sense of generational identity more than any other was television. "Television itself is a baby boomer, it's a baby-boom instrument," said former NBC head Brandon Tartikoff. "The baby-boom generation has never known a living environment in which there wasn't a television." Television—along with the marketers who used it—and music gave Boomers a common language and created the first integrated national culture. That is not to say that America's national culture was created in postwar America. Our political system was built on a foundation of shared beliefs; the growth of big business, along with mass circulation magazines, Hollywood movies, professional sports teams, and radio in the early 20th century had created the fragile scaffolding of a shared culture. In the 1920s the grandparents of Boomers in small towns and big cities flocked to new movie houses to see stars such as Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, Clara Bow, and Joan Crawford. In 1927, 150,000 people paid to see Gene Tunney defeat Jack Dempsey in Chicago, but more than 50 million listened to the bout on radio. The radio allowed Boomer parents to listen collectively to the soothing voice of Franklin Roosevelt as he reassured them through the trauma of depression and war.

Movies and radio, however, could not match television's power to mold a common culture. Television separated the Boomers from every previous generation. Mass production and technological advances in the 1950s allowed most American families to own a set. The size of the screen expanded from 12 inches to 19 and 21 inches; even as color was introduced in 1953, the cost of the sets declined from \$700 in the late 1940s to as little as \$200 by 1955. In 1948 there were fewer than 400,000 TV sets in the country. Four years later there were nearly 19 million. By 1960 nine out of every ten American homes had a TV, and the average set was turned on for at least six hours every day. The following year for the first time, television surpassed radio and print as the primary source of news for most Americans. According to the political scientist Paul Light, the average Baby Boomer had viewed between 12,000 and 15,000 hours of television by age 16.

Starting in the 1950s Americans across the country watched the same shows, laughed at the same jokes, and watched the same news stories unfold. Most shows avoided controversy and celebrated

rugged individualism and family togetherness. Families were intact, men worked during the day, and women stayed at home. No one was ever sick. No one was poor. Father Knows Best presented the ideal American family. Jim Anderson, an insurance agent in the prosperous midwestern town of Springfield, provided for the family and solved the crisis of the day. His supportive wife, Margaret, tended to housekeeping and watched over their three wholesome kids: Bud, Betty, and Kathy. Many other shows—Leave It to Beaver, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet—presented similar rosy portraits of the American family. "Ward," a caring and always well-dressed June Cleaver repeated many times, "I'm worried about the Beaver."

Television transformed American social habits. Studies showed that the average household watched five hours of television a day. Most viewers confessed to reading fewer books and magazines after purchasing a TV set. When a popular show was on, all the toilets in the nation flushed at the same time, during commercial breaks and when the program ended. Saturated by commercials, children could recite the Pepsi-Cola theme song—"Pepsi-Cola hits the spot / twelve full ounces, that's a lot"—before they learned the national anthem. They may not have been able to read, but children had no trouble recognizing the word *detergent*. As the poet T. S. Eliot observed, television provided a valuable shared experience, but it was "a medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome."

As young children, Boomers grew up watching wholesome family shows, but they came of age in the 1960s seeing police dogs and fire hoses turned against innocent protesters on the news. Americans sat in their living rooms viewing images of bombs exploding on Vietnamese villages the same way that had once seen Beaver fret over his school science project. "Vietnam made us a television nation," observed media critic Tom Shales. "We lived through years of darkness and emerged from them media-wise. Even media-obsessed." Television served as a national mirror for the Boomer generation. They thought about the world in television images and used its lexicon to communicate with each other.

If television ads bombarded Boomers with images of the good life filled with a cornucopia of new consumer products, a lateblooming fad for Sigmund Freud gave permission to use them. By

the time the Viennese psychoanalyst traveled to the United States in 1909, his theories that early childhood development shaped adult behavior had already been widely disseminated and nearly universally dismissed in Europe. In the United States, however, left-leaning intellectuals and social reformers latched on to his critique of sexual repression and emphasis on the importance of the environment in shaping behavior as a useful antidote to staid Victorian culture. After World War II Freud's ideas gained wide currency in the United States. In 1947 Life magazine featured an article titled "Psychoanalysis" that emphasized that "repressed sexual desires" and "infantile experiences" were the cause of adult unhappiness. Articles about Freud became a regular feature in other popular magazines—Time, Atlantic Monthly, Look, and Life—as well as mainstream newspapers. References to Freudian slips became a part of everyday vocabulary, and Freud's emphasis on the unconscious, guilt, sublimation, and repression changed the way people thought of themselves and the way they related to each other.

Thanks to Dr. Benjamin Spock, Boomers-often called "Spock babies"-had Freud mixed with their baby formula. "Benjamin Spock probably did more than any single individual to disseminate the theory of Sigmund Freud in America," observed the psychiatrist and Freudian critic E. Fuller Torrey. Spock, whose The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child (1946) served as the bible for Boomer parents, had attended the New York Psychoanalytic Institute in the 1930s and was determined to bring Freud and his ideas to a mass audience. Spock rejected his own upbringing, which emphasized strict feeding schedules and unchanging routines, and insisted that parents respond to the needs and schedules of their children. "Trust yourself, you know more than you think you do," he reassured worried new parents. His ideas reflected the optimism of the age, reinforcing that personality was malleable if only parents developed the right skills. Along with practical advice about colic, toilet training, and temper tantrums, Spock offered parents sugar-coated doses of Freudian psychology. Since he believed that most adult problems began in childhood, Spock instructed parents about concepts of "sibling rivalry" and used Freud's Oedipus complex to explain the behavior of 6-year-olds. "The noblest things that man has thought and made are partly the product of his longing for and renunciation

of his beloved parent," he wrote. Whether they purchased the book, as one of five mothers did, borrowed it from their local library, read the excerpts in magazines and newspapers, or listened to him on television, Boomer mothers found it impossible to escape Spock's influence. In a December 1955 episode of *I Love Lucy*, the husbandwife team of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz flipped through a dog-eared copy of Spock's book to decide whether to send "little Ricky" to nursery school. (The answer was yes.)

Later, when many Spock babies grew up to be campus protesters and feminists, conservatives traced these trends back to their permissive upbringing. The problem, however, is that most of the conservative critics, and many future New Right disciples, were also Spock babies. Although Spock emerged as an outspoken liberal activist during the 1960s, the Freudian ideals he espoused had more of a cultural than a political impact on the Baby Boom generation. The emphasis on individual psychology and the discovery of "inner" happiness produced a generation consumed with finding self-fulfillment. "The overwhelming success of Freudianism in America lies in the general insistence on individual fulfillment, satisfaction and happiness," social critic Alfred Kazin observed in 1956. "The insistence on personal happiness represents the most revolutionary force in modern times."

It has become a cliché, though true, to say that Boomers replaced the ethic of sacrifice and self-denial of the Greatest Generation with the ethic of self-fulfillment of the '60s generation. As Kenneth Keniston wrote in Young Radicals: Notes on Committed Youth, the parents of Baby Boomers were raised on rules that "emphasized respect, the control of impulse, obedience to authority, and the traditional . . . values of hard work, deferred gratification, and self-restraint." According to the pollster Daniel Yankelovich, instead of asking, "Will I be able to make a living?" Boomers, in contrast to their parents, wanted to know, "How can I find self-fulfillment?" Their search for self-fulfillment often found expression in language borrowed from pop psychology. Not surprisingly, the word lifestyle, which, in the words of one cultural historian, "suggested free choice, the uninhibited search for what looked and felt right," made its first appearance in Webster's dictionary in 1961. By the 1970s everybody was talking about "reaching their potential," working "to keep in touch with their feelings," to be "true to one's self." Implicit in the Boomer faith

in self-fulfillment was a powerful streak of individualism, a willingness to question authority and established rules, and a disdain for bureaucracy. In 1940 only 11 percent of women and 20 percent of men agreed with the statement, "I am an important person." By 1990 over 60 percent of both sexes agreed with the statement.

When future historians look back at the contribution made by the Boomer generation, they will no doubt place the expansion of individual freedom at the top of the list of achievements. Boomers not only cheered on the civil rights movement, they spearheaded the feminist cause in the 1970s, and fought for a host of new rights and responsibilities—not just gay rights, handicapped rights, the right to privacy, but the responsibility of everyone to participate in the economy, or more generally just to become engaged in the culture—that changed the tone and character of modern life. Their emphasis on individual rights and the underlying challenge to authority led to a dramatic democratization of American culture. The Founding Generation (the real "greatest generation") forged the American experiment based on the "inalienable rights" of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," even if only property-owning white men were able to enjoy those rights. The World War II generation saved that experiment from the imminent threat of Nazi tyranny at the same time that it enforced segregation at home. The Boomer generation was the first to realize the American dream of equal opportunity for all its citizens. Boomers have not solved all of America's problems, and they have created new ones of their own. But it cannot be denied that this generation has strengthened the foundation of American freedom. The Boomers inherited a thriving republic from their parents, and they are passing on to their children a society that is even more open, dynamic, energetic, and innovative.

It has become fashionable to bash Boomers—to dismiss the entire generation as self-centered and narcissistic. But this criticism sells the Boomer generation short. Much of the debate over the Boomer legacy has its roots in the 1960s when the generation emerged on the national scene. The civil wars of the 1960s were less bloody than the battle between North and South a century earlier, but their impact on American society and politics was no less profound. Grumpy conservatives blame Boomers for their reckless assault on authority, for precipitating a decline of traditional stan-

dards, and for creating a culture of dissent. Utopian-minded liberals feel betrayed by Boomers who, after a promising start, became more interested in acquiring status and wealth than in changing the world. Although they have clearly disappointed partisans on both the right and the left, Boomers have achieved something that eluded both the Roosevelt and Reagan revolutions: a general sense of happiness. In 2000, surveys by *USA Today*, CNN, and the Gallup Organization showed an unprecedented 83 percent of Americans expressed satisfaction with the economy, 73 percent believed they were better off personally than they were in 1992, and 69 percent were satisfied with the state of affairs in the country. And they were optimistic about the future: Two-thirds believed the next generation would have a better life than their parents had had.

In the end Boomers have transformed American society and institutions, but not always in ways they had anticipated or like to remember. The Boomer generation replaced the political struggles of the 1960s with the culture wars of the 1980s. In the 1960s Americans clashed over fundamental questions of power in society: redistributing wealth, empowering African Americans, debating America's place in the world. After the 1970s debate in America often centered around culture and the proper limits of individual expression. Political debates in America are no longer about power but about "values." But the culture war, and the heated debate between left and right often dramatized on television talk shows, disguise a fundamental reality. Not only do Boomers control most major institutions in America, but the ethic of self-fulfillment and the broader definition of individualism have seeped into every corner of American society and culture. Today, Boomer culture is American culture.

3

There is no agreement about the dates that make up the Baby Boom, although most observers define it as those born between 1946, when births started their dramatic climb, and 1964, when widespread use of the Pill contributed to a decline in birthrates. During that period roughly 76 million babies were born, making the postwar Baby Boom the largest generation in history. Yet an eighteen-year span is a very long time, and as I looked at the history of the nation through the lens of that generation, I found it useful to divide the giant gen-

eration into two groups. What I call Boomers are those born between 1945 and 1957, when the birthrate leveled off—this leading edge of the generation was the group that changed the country. "Shadow Boomers" are those born between 1958 and 1964, maintaining the momentum of the Boomers but not changing its impact. Certainly the life experiences of a child born in 1946 were very different from one born in 1964. The early generation of Baby Boomers grew up with rock and roll, the *Mickey Mouse Club*, prosperity, crewcuts, the idealism of John F. Kennedy, and the social struggles of the 1960s. A child born in 1964 confronted a world of oil embargos, stagflation, Watergate, sideburns, and disco balls. Older Baby Boomers spent much of their lives trying to reconcile their youthful idealism with social reality. Younger Boomers, raised in an age of cynicism, had less idealism to compromise.

According to the economist Mark Berger, college-educated Baby Boomers born after 1957 earned 10 percent less over their lifetimes than those born just the year earlier. "If you were born in 1957," Berger said, "you may be in this same size group as those born in 1953, but you've got all those people in front of you who already entered the workforce, so things looked a little worse." Polls showed that Boomers born after 1957 were more likely to question their ability to influence government policy and less likely to support the 1960s Great Society legislation. There is also the issue of family birth order: Those born in the early stage of the Baby Boom were most likely to be the firstborn, and some studies suggest that birth order can shape personality.

There is also evidence to suggest that older Boomers were more likely to be raised by lenient parents. In 1946 Dr. Benjamin Spock debuted his Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care. By the late 1950s, however, growing concern about juvenile delinquency led Spock to reconsider his approach. In 1957 he revised his book, admitted that he had erred on the side of permissiveness, and counseled parents to provide more structure and discipline for their children. Mothers took the new message to heart. A major study of child-rearing practices concluded, "By 1960, the mothers studied were more similar to the 1940 sample and displayed less babying, protectiveness, affection, and approval than 1950 mothers."

This book varies from standard discussions of the Boomers in

one other way. The problem with most of the literature examining the Baby Boom is that it takes a static view of the life cycle. Generations, like individuals, change and evolve as they move from childhood, to teenagers, to adults. Until recently social psychologists paid little attention to development beyond adolescence. Not only does the Freudian notion that most personality traits are formed in childhood and early adolescence still hold considerable influence, but until recently, most people did not have to worry about midlife development because they did not live long enough to experience it. Before 1900 the average life expectancy of Americans was less than 50 years; a 40-year-old man was considered old. "People thought of being little and then of being old," observed Yale historian John Demos. "But the middle part was not articulated as a distinct stage."

As life expectancy expanded in the 20th century, some observers speculated about the possibility of a generational life cycle. From Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, to psychologists Erik Erikson and Daniel Levinson, to popular writer Gail Sheehy, the life cycle has been divided into variously defined segments. The underlying premise of this book is that it is possible to understand American history since 1945 by charting the life cycle of the Baby Boom. I have broken down modern America into three eras. The first era, which I have called the Cult of Youth, corresponds with the childhood and early adulthood of the generation. It extends from the 1950s through the late 1970s when the youngest of the Baby Boomers (those born in 1957) would either be entering the workforce in large numbers or preparing to graduate from college. The second era, called the Great Shift, covers the years of middle adulthood, from roughly the late 1970s to the early 1990s. It was when the Boomers became breadwinners and parents that American politics lurched to the right; as Churchill said, "Any young man who isn't a socialist hasn't got a heart, but any old man who is a socialist hasn't got a head." The third era, Boomer Nation, describes Boomers at their peak of power during the 1990s, perhaps best symbolized by Bill Clinton's election as president in 1992.

It is not my intention to suggest that the handful of people chosen for this study are representative of a generation as large and diverse as the Baby Boomers. They are not. Their lives do, however, illuminate some of the broad themes of the age. The characters are not household names, but they have all been influential in their respective professions, and they have, in ways large and small, helped to define what it means to be a Boomer. Each character touches on the story of an important dimension of postwar life—television, advertising, religion, architecture, feminism, and the Vietnam War. Other important aspects of Boomer culture—music and technology, for example—arise only indirectly. Of course not all Boomers believe the same things or act the same way. They find themselves on all sides of contentious social and political issues. They are Democrats, Republicans, independents, and "none of the above." Some go to church, some do not. Nevertheless, collectively, there is a signal beneath the noise, driven by their age and common interests. Boomers have remade America in ways large and small, with all the drama of history. This is their story.

### **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

**Bobby Muller** (1945) joined the marines after college and went to Vietnam to fight communism. In 1969 a Vietcong bullet ripped through his body, puncturing his lungs and severing his spinal cord, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. His story, and the story of the Vietnam Veterans of America, which he helped found, sheds light on how the most controversial event of the Baby Boom generation continues to haunt the nation.

**Fran Visco** (1948), a respected Philadelphia lawyer, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1987. In 1991 she was elected president of the National Breast Cancer Coalition. Visco's life sheds light on the evolution of the women's movement, the rise of powerful grassroots lobbying groups, and the growing concern among aging Boomers about health issues.

**Elizabeth Platter-Zyberk** (1950) is a Miami-based architect who, with her husband, Andres Duaney, designed Seaside, Florida, in the 1980s. The new urbanism articulated their generation's nostalgia for a lost sense of community. In the 1990s Platter-Zyberk was on the cutting edge of a movement among Boomers to find a new balance between tradition and change, individualism and community.

Marshall Herskovitz (1952), writer-producer, is, along with his creative partner, Ed Zwick, perhaps the most thoughtful, and certainly the most introspective, chronicler of Baby Boomers. His *thirtysomething*, which premiered on ABC in 1987, captured the anxiety of a handful of young adults trying to reconcile their grand expectations of life with the cold, hard realities of making a living and sustaining relationships.

Alberta Haile (Wilson) (1954) is an education reformer and school choice advocate who once dropped out of high school. Her life revolved around drugs and sex until she discovered religion in the 1970s. Her life journey has been more dramatic, and more tragic, than most others, but her story

sheds light on two interrelated themes of the Baby Boom generation: the rise of religious fundamentalism and the powerful conservative backlash against liberalism.

**Donny Deutsch** (1957) transformed his father's small boutique advertising firm into one of the most influential and creative agencies in the country. He also experienced something unique to a large number of Boomers: an extended adolescence. Father and son are symbolic of the two generations. Together their story underscores the bonds of mutual affection and skill that tie together the "Greatest Generation" and the "Boomer generation."

# THE CULT OF YOUTH: 1945–1978

The Boomers came from different back-grounds, were raised in varied circumstances, and endured unique personal crises. But they were all children at some point in the 1950s, teenagers at some point in the 1960s, and young adults by the end of the 1970s. That simple demographic observation goes a long way to explaining American politics and culture in the first few decades after World War II. The flood of babies made America of the 1950s a child-centered nation, where parents, teachers, and marketers labored to satisfy their every need and desire. "The twentieth century is not likely to be the Century of the Common Man," groused the sociologist David Reisman, "but the Century of the Child." In the typical American home of the 1950s, he noted, "It is the parents, and especially the fathers, who are marginal, who are in a precarious position, who are frightened conformists, while the children hold the strategic initiative."

As questioning, skeptical, and self-aware teenagers, Boomers would transform the 1960s into a decade of social experimentation and cultural liberalism. In 1965, 41 percent of all Americans were under the age of 20. Unlike their parents, who often started working in their late teens and early twenties, many Boomers had the advantage of extending their adolescence by going to college. College enrollments soared from 3.6 million in 1960 to almost 8 million in 1970. Before World War II there were no colleges or universities with more than 15,000 students. By 1970 more than fifty schools had 30,000 students stuffed on their campuses. Between 1958 and 1970

the University of Wisconsin saw its enrollment swell from 14,000 to 35,000; the University of Minnesota doubled to over 40,000, and other large state universities witnessed similar increases.

With so many young people concentrated in one place, it is little wonder that college campuses became the seedbed of youth protest. "We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit," declared the Port Huron Statement, the founding document of the New Left. "Probably never before in human history," wrote Richard Flacks, "has a society brought together such a large number of potential dissidents... under conditions that so greatly facilitated their mutual influence." Lyndon Johnson's decision to escalate the Vietnam War in 1965 provided the spark that ignited the generation.

Boomers were not the driving force of the social clash of the 1960s, but they absorbed and institutionalized its lessons. It was the ripple effect of the decade—the loosening of social mores about sex and drugs, along with the challenge to all forms of authority—that produced a revolution in social values. Boomers insisted on a new informality that is hard to overstate. "In the '70s, hardly anybody was a hippie, because everybody was," declared one observer. Emblems of '60s protest, like long hair and casual dress, would gain mainstream appeal during the 1970s. Even notable fashion failures—blue polyester leisure suits, and wide, pointy collars—reflected a rebellion against the formality of an older generation.

The story of the first thirty years of the Boom is a story of baby culture turning into youthful celebration, with all the self-absorption inherent in young people (which unfortunately and unfairly tainted the Boomers as self-absorbed for life). The best selling self-help book of the 1970s would be *Looking Out for #1*. "If we can learn to love and nurture ourselves," said the authors of *How to Be Your Own Best Friend*, "we will find ourselves richer than we ever imagined." For many Boomers, the search included discovering repressed sexual feelings. Culturally, at least, the 1970s were the "Me Decade," as Tom

Wolfe described it in his famous 1976 New York magazine article. "The old alchemical dream was changing base metals into gold," he wrote. "The new alchemical dream is: changing one's personality—remaking, remodeling, elevating and polishing one's very self... and observing, studying and doting on it."

While Boomers redefined the political and social landscape, they continued to exercise their greatest influence on the economy. At heart the Boomers were consumers, not revolutionaries. As they moved through the life cycle, marketers and manufacturers moved with them. "The high-school set has graduated from the ice-cream, soda-fountain and bicycle circuit into the big leagues of U.S. consumption," Newsweek noted in 1966. That year high school students—a small subset of Boomers—were responsible for buying 16 percent of cosmetics, 45 percent of soft drinks, 24 percent of wristwatches, 81 percent of single records, and 30 percent of all cameras sold in the United States. Companies recognized the potential of the lucrative young adult market. "The sheer weight of numbers makes the youth of this country a factor that just cannot be ignored," a Ford executive declared in 1966, two years after producing the first Mustang. "Frankly, we are going all out." American Airlines tried to capture teen loyalty by offering them half-priced flights. Retailer Montgomery Ward began its annual catalogue with a seventy-seven-page supplement on girls' fashions entitled "Young America in Action." Even companies not selling directly to Boomers tried looking young. "The baby boom was so overwhelming that it made everybody think young," said advertising pioneer Mary Wells Lawrence, who gave fledgling Braniff Airlines a youthful facelift.

The end of the first period of Boomer history would be fraught with economic challenge, however. During the 1950s and 1960s the number of people joining the workforce increased at a steady pace of roughly 1 million a year. As Boomers graduated from college and started looking for jobs in the 1970s, the economy had to absorb more than 2 million new workers every year. Their numbers may