

GENERATIONS APART



XERS vs BOOMERS vs THE ELDERLY

EDITED BY

RICHARD D. THAU & IAY S. HEFLIN

GENERATIONS APART

Contemporary Issues

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To our children and grandchildren, yet to be born,
who will someday judge us prophets or fools.

Contents

Introduction	11
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PART ONE: TENSIONS BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS

1. Back from the Future <i>Michael Kinsley</i>	18
2. Respect Your Juniors <i>Heather Lamm</i>	22
3. Stuck in the Shadows with You: Observations on Post-Boomer Culture <i>Robert A. George</i>	24
4. The Birth of a Revolutionary Class <i>Lester C. Thurow</i>	31
5. End Special Tax Favors for Seniors <i>William Strauss and Neil Howe</i>	36
6. Herky-Jerky Bang-Bang <i>Russell Baker</i>	40

8 GENERATIONS APART

PART TWO: WHO HOLDS THE POWER

- | | |
|---|----|
| 7. Interview with Sen. Alan Simpson
<i>Maya MacGuineas</i> | 46 |
| 8. The Death of Lead . . . or Leave
<i>Stuart Miller</i> | 52 |
| 9. Fun in Politics? As If.
<i>Jeff Shesol</i> | 60 |
| 10. Preamble to the <i>Third Millennium Declaration</i> | 65 |

PART THREE: HOW GENERATIONS CYCLE

- | | |
|--|----|
| 11. Winter Comes Again
<i>William Strauss and Neil Howe</i> | 72 |
| 12. A Letter to the Rising Generation
<i>Cornelia A. P. Comer</i> | 81 |
| 13. The Two Generations
<i>Randolph S. Bourne</i> | 95 |

PART FOUR: DO DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS SPELL DISASTER?

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 14. The Nation's Changing Age Profile: What Does It Mean?
<i>Susan A. MacManus</i> | 110 |
| 15. Will America Grow Up Before It Grows Old?
<i>Peter G. Peterson</i> | 140 |
| 16. Bipartisan Commission on Entitlement
and Tax Reform: Planning for the Future
<i>Sen. J. Robert Kerrey and Sen. John C. Danforth</i> | 152 |
| 17. Bipartisan Commission on Entitlement and Tax Reform:
Statement of Commissioner Richard L. Trumka | 178 |

PART FIVE: SOCIAL SECURITY AND MEDICARE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 18. How Social Security Redistributes Income
<i>C. Eugene Steuerle and Jon Bakija</i> | 192 |
| 19. The Sky's Not Falling, the Sky's Not Falling!
<i>Newsday Editorial</i> | 232 |

20. The Myth of the 2.2 Percent Solution	
<i>Neil Howe and Richard Jackson</i>	236
21. Don't Worry, Generation X: Why the Demographic Nightmare of the Twentysomethings Isn't Likely to Come True	
<i>Richard C. Leone</i>	241
22. Listen Up, Generation X	
<i>Neil Howe and Richard Jackson</i>	244
23. Turning Workers into Investors	
<i>Carolyn Weaver</i>	247
24. First, the System Is Hardly in Crisis	
<i>Robert M. Ball</i>	250
25. Benefit Cuts, Kind and Gentle	
<i>Edward M. Gramlich</i>	253
Contributors	255

Introduction

There has been a lot of talk about generational warfare over the past few years. Some politicians have claimed that young adults, members of so-called Generation X, will soon recognize the onerous financial burdens being placed on them by older Americans and launch a rebellion.

This scenario is doubtful—for now. Members of this younger generation have it pretty good, and they know it. While their payroll taxes may be the highest in history, and the national debt may exceed \$5 trillion, they haven't been drafted into a war they didn't want to fight, nor are they being systematically denied their civil rights. They can vote if they so choose, yet they take that right for granted and avoid the polls on election day.

While Generation X may be complacent here at the turn of the century, there are warning signs that suggest Xers themselves, their Baby Boomer parents, and their own children (many yet to be born) may find themselves embroiled in a difficult struggle for America's financial resources in the early twenty-first century.

A wealth of information published within the 1990s predicts a fundamental shift in American demographics over the next 30 or so years. In brief, the federal government and other sources project the number of Americans over age 70 will double to 48 million between now and 2030, while the rest of the population will grow

far less quickly. This will lead all of America to look much the way Florida does today—with consequences that could be catastrophic if not recognized and anticipated now.

As this anthology demonstrates, there have long been differences of opinion, and indeed struggles, between generations. These persist today. Consider the press coverage of the 1996 presidential campaign, where, in a *Newsweek* story by Joe Klein, the nominees were reduced in the headline to single-word descriptions of their generations: “Saxophone” (i.e., Bill Clinton as the jazzy, hip Baby Boomer who likes to hang out) vs. “Sacrifice” (i.e., Bob Dole as the injured World War II hero who didn’t dodge the draft).

The question for the reader is this: do these differences, particularly between Xers and Boomers who will be around in 30 years, set the stage for a true generational war in the future? What will happen in 2030, when a large, vocal, and likely well-organized senior population attempts to draw the Social Security and Medicare benefits to which it believes it is entitled, while the rest of the population must endure crippling tax hikes to pay the bills?

Barring an unforeseen disaster, such as a war that would wipe out a sizable portion of the U.S. population, or a massive wave of legal immigration that would support the Baby Boomers in retirement, there is a strong likelihood that tomorrow’s seniors will be an extremely costly demographic group to pass through retirement. Whether that cost is borne smoothly or disruptively is, in large part, for us to determine now.

Currently, senior citizens are the dominant demographic group politically in the United States. Represented by the 30 million-plus strong American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and other seniors organizations, the elderly have been extremely effective at using their clout to successfully demand the protection of benefits for themselves—without much regard to the cost to others—and without opposition from the Baby Boomers and Generation Xers who are footing the bill.

These two younger generations, busy building their families and their careers, with little free time to get involved in mind-numbing discussions about the entitlement programs that are of great interest to seniors, are unable and unwilling to challenge the seniors lobby.

One great question facing America is whether AARP and other pro status quo seniors groups will be able to attract Baby Boomers

in the same way they attracted members of the World War II generation. If they can, what happens when the largest demographic group also becomes the most politically powerful? Is there any way that Generation Xers will be able to organize themselves into a cohesive political voice by the time they hit middle age and be effective in protecting their own interests?

Only time will tell. Meanwhile, it is critical for Americans to judge whether the current tensions between generations, as presented in Part One of this book, are genuine expressions of a larger generational hostility, or simply intellectual rantings from isolated thinkers. If they are the former, does the act of preparing intelligently for the future common good become impossible when generations are already at odds?

Part Two shows that it is essential for readers to consider the skew toward seniors in today's generational politics and the fractured nature of Generation X's political voice. In Part Three, the cyclical nature of generations and how they tend to repeat in American history is described by historians William Strauss and Neil Howe. As readers will find in that section, tensions between generations are nothing new.

Part Four centers on demographics and money: who pays what to whom, and what dynamics of population drive the finances of America, both today and in the future. Finally, Part Five offers myriad perspectives on the programs most likely endangered by the Baby Boom's imminent elderhood: Social Security and Medicare. How these massive and growing programs are or are not reformed could well determine America's economic position in the world for the next 50 years.

For the first time, the leading thinkers on both (or multiple) sides of these vital issues are together in one volume. While the editors of this anthology hold a personal opinion about generational tensions and how best to prepare for the future, we have attempted to present all sides in this discussion.

—Richard Thau and Jay Heflin

Part One

TENSIONS BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS

Young men have a passion for regarding their elders as senile.

—Henry Adams

Age in a virtuous person, of either sex, carries in it an authority which makes it preferable to all the pleasures of youth.

—Sir Richard Steele

