

(from *Generations* by Strauss and Howe, published in 1991)

Completing the Millennial Diagonal

Watching today's little kindergartners at play focuses the mind on what these children might someday accomplish. We wonder whether the tiny boys and girls now playing with Lego blocks might become great twenty-first-century architects and builders. Whether the tykes out capturing lightning bugs might grow up as the nation's next great generation of Nobel-laureate scientists. Whether the first-graders now reciting the Pledge of Allegiance might someday show an extraordinary talent for teamwork and public service. Whether the children now being taught to say "please" and "thank you" will remember those lessons. The generational cycle tells us not just to wonder, but to expect such a destiny from these kids. America's mothers and fathers are today giving birth to the nation's next great Civic generation, inheritors of the tradition of Cotton Mather, Thomas Jefferson, and John Kennedy. History suggests there is but one condition: The crisis they encounter as rising adults must turn out well. For this reason, these children have the most riding on the post-1990 endowment behavior of the G.I., Silent, and Boom Generations.

(1991-2003) Entering Youth in an Inner-Driven Era

To elders disappointed in 13ers, the onset of Millennial youth will bring unrelenting good news. As these kids pass through school, they will sail smoothly behind a debris-clearing insistence on quality education and good behavior. The first impact of midlife Boomer nurture will be felt in day care and the primary grades. Throughout the nation's public schools, Boom teachers and administrators will join the Transcendentals and Missionaries as renowned midlife educators. Silent elders will be far less inclined than G.I. elders to mount "Proposition 13" rebellions against school taxes. In its twilight years of Silent leadership, Congress will repair the "safety net" for the benefit of infants and small children. The ambitious educational goals set in 1990 for the year 2000 will be substantially achieved: From suburbs to inner cities, **schools will show rising aptitude scores**, and American children will gradually improve their ranking vis-a-vis the Japanese, Europeans, and others who have consistently out-scored 13ers.

By the late 1990s, the social environment for American adolescents will show huge contrasts from what it was during the late 1970s. By degrees, **the child's world will move toward greater protection**. In and out of school, Millennials will hear a sterner, more resolute adult message than 13ers ever knew. Boomers will crisply define right and wrong, caring less about a child's opinion than their own (G.I.) parents had cared about the Beaver's back in the 1950s. Thanks to the active presence of family-focused 13ers, home-employed Boomers, and live-in Silent grandparents, the quality of home child care will improve, and neighborhoods will retain more daytime adults. Parents or not, adults of all ages will show far less tolerance for criminal behavior by and against children and will push the unruly remnants of the 13er youth era beyond the fringe of family life. Boomers will try to guard Millennials against 13er wildness. And, even when they fail, that wildness will serve the same purpose that Lost wildness served for G.I.s: It will show child Millennials what to avoid —a negative standard by which elders and

kids can together take pride in the civic virtue of the new generation. **Millennials will become a generation of trends**, from a less protected and still rambunctious first wave to a highly protected, purposeful, and unusually smart last wave. The Millennial Walt Disneys are already in elementary school; the Millennial George Bushes will be born just after the year 2000.

The Millennial **youth culture will be more clean-cut and homogeneous** than any seen since that of the circa-1930 G.I.s. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, schools will at last be fully computer-equipped and the learning style of students will shift from an MTV-ish “parallel” thinking back to a more logical “serial” thinking. Where Boomers and 13ers had once seen computers as a force for social individuation, Millennials will see them as a force for social homogenization. **Teen peer leaders will express a growing interest in community affairs and a growing enthusiasm for collective action.** Under the Boom regime of get-tough laws and no-kidding moral standards, **teen pathologies—truancy, substance abuse, crime, suicide, unwed pregnancy—will all decline.** Adults will welcome a change in teen sex, which will become less matter-of-fact and starkly physical, more romantic and friendly. These trends will be apparent not just in affluent suburbs, but also in inner cities where peer-pressured boys will show more responsibility toward their sexual (and parental) relationships. **Teen music will become more ballad-like, wholesome, and singable, with top tunes appealing to all generations.** (To Millennial ears, on the other hand, 13er music will sound chaotic—and old Boomer classics will sound oddly ethereal and unpleasantly androgynous.) From music to fashion to cinema, the **adolescent culture will accentuate, even celebrate, sexual distinctions.**

When the first Millennials come of age in the early twenty-first century, 13ers will begin mellowing—just in time for these young Civics to develop a positive impression of the Reactive peer personality. The G.I. recollection of their 1920s-era fun-loving (Lost) and strict (Missionary) teachers offers an illustration of what may lie in store. Where Millennials will respect Boomers as beacons for the “should-dos” of life, they will rely on 13ers as avuncular guides to the “want-to-dos.” Millennials will see their next-elders as daring, puckish, and full of mischief. In return, 13ers will see these kids as extremely smart but naive—a bit too optimistic for their own good and in need of a lesson or two about real life. **College-age Millennials will be fascinated by 13er cultural trends, occasionally joining in 13er naughtiness—but will try to do so discreetly, so as not to disappoint the high Boomer standard.** Later, 13ers will show a continuing kindness toward a younger generation getting a better deal out of life (though maybe a bit less fun) than they ever got at the same age.

While still in their youth, Millennials will be called upon to perform civic deeds. **Community institutions (schools, libraries, churches, police) will become increasingly important in a child’s life. Scout programs will be revitalized, and new ones formed.** Boomers will prod Millennial adolescents to **spend more time studying, practicing, and organizing with some socially useful purpose** in view. By law and family fiat, **teen employment will be sharply curtailed. Child television viewing will decline, and what programs Millennials do watch will be sanitized and laden with moral lessons.** Universities will provide new government-aided forms of tuition finance, linked to the performance of public service before, during, or after college. Around the year 2000, a wave of very different freshmen will descend on America’s campuses, showing a great talent for student politics, for athletic teamwork, and—in the classroom—for math and science.

Through adolescence, Millennials will look upon government as a more benign and reliable means of providing for their age bracket than a helter-skelter marketplace increasingly shaped by rising 13ers. **A Boom-enacted program of mandatory national service will put millions of youths in uniform**—a compulsion Millennials will not mind nearly as much as Boomers did (or 13ers would) at like age. Instead, they will see in it the opportunity to prove their civic virtue and earn public adulation. Whatever practical agenda comes their way, **Millennials will figure out a solution, organize, cooperate, share burdens, and get the job done**—all with an effectiveness and cheerfulness that will stun their elders. For all their excellence, the **first Millennials to come of age will also seem a bit bland**. They won't waste their time reflecting on values or following Aging Boomers will gradually realize their style of nurture is producing better doers than feelers, better rationalists than spiritualists. In short, these kids will bear an eerie resemblance to the G.I.s against whom Boomers rebelled in the late 1960s. But that likeness won't bother most Boom midlifers, who will see in Millennials precisely what the country needs to overcome adversity.

Like the old Awakeners, who loved their Republican kids while lamenting the Liberty, Boomers will develop far better lifelong friendships with Millennials than with 13ers. Indeed, the relationships between older Idealists and younger Civics have ranked among the warmest intergenerational bonds in American history.

(2004-2025) Entering Rising Adulthood in a Crisis Era

Early in the Crisis era, rising-adult Millennials (especially the first wave) will encounter economic and social hardship. Unlike 13ers, however, they will emerge undaunted—thanks to their patience, confidence, and powerful instinct for community. **Around the time their last wave is reaching its late teens, a secular crisis will peak**, just as it did for the Glorious, Republicans, and G.I.s. This cathartic moment will seal the Millennial as a generation, distinguishing them forever from midlife 13ers and younger Adaptives, and fixing their cohort boundaries.

For now, we locate the former boundary between the 1981-1982 cohorts and the latter between the 2003-2004 cohorts. Both locations are estimates. Most likely, we will have to wait another four decades before drawing the Millennial end-year with any precision, just as in 1910 we would have had to wait until the late 1940s to draw it for G.I.s.

The Millennial' Civic peer personality is not preordained. If the crisis comes too soon or (worse) unfolds badly, the Millennial will mirror the Progressives, a smart but hobbled generation that was later unable to realize the agenda of its Idealist elders. But if the crisis allows the Millennial to coalesce as a genuine Civic type, this generation will show more teamlike spirit and more likemindedness in action than most Americans then alive will recall ever having seen in young people. **Before the crisis, many Millennial may be attracted to global ideologies that promise material utopias through collective action**. As the nation unifies, **new voters will coalesce politically and may produce an electoral landslide**, perhaps even a **sudden party realignment**, that will strengthen the mandate of aging Boom leaders.

Elderly Boomers will see in this generation an effective instrument for saving the world. Having themselves screamed against duty and discipline when young, Boomers will now demand duty and discipline from post-adolescents. They will get both. In return, **old Boomers**

(joined by midlife 13ers) will shower youthful heroes and heroines with praise and reward.

Inevitably, rising Millennials will start feeling the intoxication of hubris. **They will resist elders—Boomers included**—whom they perceive as unwilling to relinquish private and material privilege. Just as young Republicans muzzled the Tory Awakeners and young G.I.s voted the laissez-faire Missionaries out of office, so too will **Millennials rise up against whomever they perceive to be enemies of community solidarity and public action.** Millennials will carry out whatever crisis mission they are assigned—as long as they can connect it with their own secular blueprint for progress. **If crisis brings war, soldiers will obey orders without complaint. If it involves environmental danger or natural resource depletion, young scientists will make historic breakthroughs. If the crisis is mostly economic, the youthful labor force will be a mighty engine of renewed American prosperity.** Whatever their elder-bestowed mission, these rising youths will not disappoint. Assuming the crisis turns out well, Millennials will be forever honored as a generation of civic achievers.

(2026-2047) Entering Midlife in an Outer-Driven Era

When the crisis is past and a new Outer-Driven era is dawning, the age bias of public institutions will tilt far (perhaps too far) in the direction of Millennial, a generation that people of all ages will by then equate with investment in the long-term future—much as government tilted in favor of Republicans in the 1790s and G.I.s in the late 1940s. In politics, as a sense of national community builds, **Millennial voters may well congeal into an “end of ideology” generation whose political parties will show little difference in style.**

Meanwhile, **they will take steps to solidify their peer conformity by unmasking radicals who embraced the wrong “ism” in their eager youth** (the early-twenty-first-century equivalent of Republican Jacobinism or G.I. communism). **The political culture of fortyish Millennials in the 2030s will be highly conformist.** Only team players will be invited.

By manner more than conviction, Millennials will construct a circa-2030 national mood reminiscent of the post-World War II “American High.” Rising leaders will feel an obligation to complete the unfinished agenda of revered Boom elders. **Institutions will strengthen, construction will boom, and American society will substantially change its outward appearance.** In churches, ministers will emphasize social fellowship over spiritual self-discovery. In universities, brilliant minds will feel in godlike control over nature. **Scientists will design (and taxpayers will fund) grand projects that glorify the thinker-doer-builder. “Right-stuff” Millennials will command (and younger technicians will copilot) manned space flights to the nearest planets.** Midlife parents and their children (with old-fashioned 13ers looking on) will perceive themselves as distinctly “modern.” The days of V-8 engines and vacuum tubes will seem as quaint in the 2030s as the days of steam turbines and telegraph lines did in the 1950s.

Like earlier Civic generations, fifty-ish Millennials will feel most comfortable with **widely separated sex roles.** They may begin to view the assertive moral posturing of very old Idealist women as anachronistic—and look upon the suspicious self-sufficiency of aging 13er women as

antisocial and possibly dangerous. **To the chagrin of old feminists, Millennials will exalt the masculine and criticize the feminine influence on public life—and do the reverse in private life.** This resurgent sexism will limit the life options of rising Adaptive women, thereby planting the seeds of **a mid-twenty-first-century feminist renaissance.**

Thanks to the Millennial team orientation, **ethnic loyalties will weaken relative to the sense of national community.** Applying the circa-1990 definition, this is far and away the most “minority” generation in American history. But **by the middle of the twenty-first century,** the very word “minority” will have an odd ring to a generation more inclined to homogenize than pluralize. **Racial integration will again be a public goal.** This will give historic opportunity for Millennial blacks and Hispanics to achieve a far greater measure of social and political equality than their Silent grandparents ever knew. As Millennials try to rid the nation of racial and ethnic distinctions, however, **they will be opposed by rising Adaptives who will see advantage in preserving pluralism.**

(2048-2069) Entering Elderhood in an Awakening Era

Sometime in the 2040s, vigorous veterans in their fifties may well march down Pennsylvania Avenue, accompanied by parade floats carrying their instruments of valor. They will celebrate the inauguration of America’s first Millennial President. The message to other generations will be much the same as it was back in 1961: the arrival in power of a great and heroic Civic generation. Watching from the sidelines will be a new (and probably “boom”) crop of kids, raised indulgently and scientifically by Millennial moms and dads. These kids will notice something a bit stale, a bit unreflective in the veterans’ parade. Beyond that, watch out: Within a few years, just as busy Millennials are undertaking their grandest-ever projects, the fury of youth will erupt.

By the **2050s, sixtyish Millennials can expect to find themselves on the wrong side of a two-apart “generation gap” reminiscent of the late 1960s.** They will think back on what good children they were back in the 1990s and puzzle over why their children cannot afford them the same respect they once showed their own Boom parents. After the fires of a new awakening have cooled, and after a series of outer-world disappointments, Millennials will retreat together into a comfortable old age—wondering with each other if their lifetime constructions can survive a rising generation of narcissists.

As a **Bushlike President stages his generation’s final inaugural—this could happen on January 20, 2069—**old Millennial heroes, by now in their seventies, will march down Pennsylvania Avenue for the last time. The next President will come to power knowing about the **Crisis of 2020** only through a child’s eye, or from film clips. When that happens, Americans of all ages will feel something missing. By our present-day capacity to reckon the future, the Millennial Generation will have an unfathomably long reach. Perhaps a million will live to see the twenty-second century. Some will be around to celebrate the arrival of babies who will live into the twenty-third century, babies who will grow up looking upon John Kennedy as distantly as Kennedy looked upon Thomas Jefferson. Those of us born in a year that will then seem ancient—in 1910, 1930, 1950, or 1970—can hardly imagine what world these future children might inherit, and what world they might pass on in their turn. We can only guess at the

great wonders they will see, the great deeds they will accomplish, the great truths they will grasp. They too will play their role in the drama of American generations.