The Next Great Generation?

‘Millenials’ are hopeful and helpful, not coarse and cynical, book argues

BY ANDREW BROWNSTEIN

I may be hard to believe now, but in the early 1960’s, it was still possible to find a Pat Boone record at the top of the pop charts or an andante funeralino movie at the local Bijou.

The culture seemed so bland, in fact, that Clark Kerr, then president of the University of California system, predicted that the next wave of students was “going to be easy to handle.”

By the end of the decade, that forecast had gone up in smoke like so many burning draft cards.

Forty years later, college administrators look at the Generation X culture of Easterners and South Parks and predict that the students of the future will continue its coarse and cynical ways.

But if a new book is correct, those officials will follow in the unenviable footsteps of Mr. Kerr.

In Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation (Vintage Books), Neil Howe and William Strauss argue that youth culture is on the cusp of a radical shift, much as it was in the Beach Blanket Bingo days of the 60’s.

The “Millenials,” the generation that begins with this year’s college freshmen and extends into the near future, is team-oriented, optimistic, and, like the G.I. generation in World War II, poised for greatness on a global scale, according to Mr. Howe and Mr. Strauss. And, if the authors are right, many of these changes will be seen first on college campuses.

“Millenials” will be us, all of us, in the near future.

Search, estimate, and speech.

A senior at the University of New Hampshire lost his volunteer job as a judge, and as an assistant later in the student newspaper to which he had contributed student stories which were published in the daily, he was taken in by the student newspaper’s editor of the day, and was relieved of his duties.

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Two days later, William F. Fischer, associate director of student life, told Cahallan to stop down from his post, in which he counseled students facing disciplinary hearings for allegedly breaking university rules.

Mr. Fischer saw his removal as a reevaluation for his position in the student newspaper, “a combination of his ability to be fair and neutral” as an advisor.

Mr. Fischer, who oversees the campus judicial system, said the problem was not related to Cahallan. Mr. Cahallan, he said, was removed for “the benefit of the student body”.

Mr. Fischer said he was never “personally investigated” any cases involving discipline. But Mr. Cahallan said the issue came up as often as once or twice a week.

“T’ll be all for the students, not drinking in the dorms,” he said. “But I’m more for privacy rights.”

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pg. A71

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Continued From Preceding Page
ded when he spoke out against child labor. Using the Internet, Mr. Kieblerger mobilized volunteers, and within five years, had established Free the Children, a 100,000-member organization that merits children’s causes around the world.

In the authors’ view, Mr. Kieblerger’s vision is a precursor of the kind of change and organization of which Millennials are capable. “This is a generation that will build rockets to go to Mars rather than make movies that wonder whether we should,” says Mr. Strauss.

Mr. Howe and Mr. Strauss make an unlikely pair of historians. Mr. Howe is an economic-policy consultant and a senior adviser to the Concord Coalition, an organization formed by several former U.S. senators to battle the federal deficit and protect Social Security. Mr. Strauss is the director of the Capital Steps, a Washington-based satirical-theater troupe. They met in the 1980’s, and their mutual interests led to the 1991 publication of Generations (William Morrow), a study of 14 American generations from Plymouth Rock to the present. Though academic respectability largely has eluded them, their four works have won critical acclaim and the ear of the powerful. Vice President Al Gore called Generations “the most stimulating book on American history I have ever read.”

But to some, the authors’ generational theory sounds like the sociological equivalent of a Dilbert board.

“It is impossible to separate generations that way,” says Arthur E. Levine, president of Teachers College of Columbia University and coauthor of When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today’s College Students (Jossey-Bass, 1998). “These are just stereotypes.”

CONSISTENT MESSAGE

The authors counter that their theories are easily tested. Besides, they add, they’ve been saying pretty much the same thing for more than 20 years. In 1991, when it looked to most critics like the youth culture was spinning out of control, Mr. Howe and Mr. Strauss were virtually alone in forecasting that crime rates would fall and academic performance would rise by the end of the decade.

In the case of Millennials Rising, many students and administrators say they can already see indicators of the trends predicted by the authors.

“Five or six years ago, students were real angry,” says Linda Kuk, vice president for student affairs at the Rochester Institute of Technology. “There was an overwhelming sense of entitlement. It was always ‘I pay your salary, and you should do what I say. Screw your rules.’”

Those attitudes are slowly starting to change, she says. Students are still getting in trouble, but there’s more likely to take responsibility for their actions. When tragic events occur in their lives, Ms. Kuk said, students tend to be more resilient.

“They seem, on the whole,hap- piest,” she says.

In the eyes of Mr. Howe and Mr. Strauss, the generational tone of the Millennials was set by the determination of their parents to avoid the neglectful child-rearing practices of their past. The Millen- nials’ college experience will be marked by parents who give new meaning to the word “overprotective.”

“The parental perfection complex is coming through,” says Mr. Strauss. “Picture the parents watching youth soccer becoming the parents watching the admissions process — with the stakes even higher.”

The authors predict that the push for higher standards in elementary and secondary school will be transferred to college. There will be increased calls for pregraduation competency testing and the elimination of remedial classes. The line between the haves and the have-nots will be drawn a bit higher and what can afford college — and counselors and private tutors. With the competition intense, rejected students and their parents will complain more and more about a perceived unfairness in admissions.

The authors’ notion of an Office of Parental Relations is not science fiction. There’s already one at the Rochester institute, and many others have emerged in recent years.

Some younger students find all the parental attention a tad embar- rassing. “My parents walked me through every step of the admissions process,” says Mr. Loyd. “During the interview, it was humiliating. I was walking around campus with my mom.”

CHANGING CAUSES

On the social front, the old adversary of race and gender will fade, the authors write, “to the chagrin of aging faculty.”

In the authors’ place is a wave of new questions — about class and the dwindling numbers of men. As women increasingly take up the leadership of student government and clubs, and men flee academe for the workplace, “how to bring young men back into higher education will become recognized as a national problem,” the authors state.

John N. Gardner, executive director of the Policy Studies Organization at the First Year College at Brevard College, in North Carolina, says the trend is already well under way.

“We are in (for a rude awakening),” he says. “The few things that I am sure of, and that’s one of them. It’s the biggest change I’ve seen on campuses in 33 years.”

In an otherwise optimistic take on the current youth culture, Millennials Rising strikes one lout note of discord.

“With their love of rules and trust in institutions, the Millennials could be led astray by a demagogue or use technology in Orwellian ways, the authors write. Mr. Howe and Mr. Strauss note that the Utopian generation, which the Millennials are supposed to emulate, came of age at the same time as others who followed a strong leader in the pursuit of a giant cause: their counterparts in Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia.

But a less fanciful possibility is that a generation that combines the cultural conservatism of the 60’s with the Big Government politics of the 60’s might just turn out . . . boring, prone to practicality rather than idealism, they say.

Lucy E. Rollin, a professor of English at Clemson University and author of The Centennial Culture by the Decade (Greenwood Press, 1999), says she has noticed that her recent students demand that “everything be spelled out” in detail and have trouble thinking for themselves.

“I was trying to get them to write with their own voice,” Ms. Rollin recalls. “But they couldn’t use the word ‘I.’ They said their high school teachers never let them use it. It was said, really.”

Then again, Ms. Rollin was born in 1941, making her a member of the so-called Silent Generation. The tides of history were different then.