

The Right Must Reckon With Its Generation Gap

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The conventional image of baby boomer political rebellion features a young left-wing activist organizing, protesting or otherwise agitating, ideally with Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" playing in the background: "There's something happening here / What it is ain't exactly clear ..."

This gauzy version of youth politics, born in the romanticization of the 1960s, is near and dear to Hollywood, academia and Democrats alike. When Howard Dean, as pure an example of a baby boomer liberal as there is, seemed poised to win his party's presidential nomination in 2003, he recalled what it was like in 1969, the year he turned 21 (and I was born). It was "a time of great hope," Dean said. "Medicare had passed. Head Start had passed. The Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act." He went on: "We felt like we were all in it together, that we all had responsibility for this country."

Dean's nostalgia erased memories of race riots, antiwar protests, domestic terrorism and the aftermath of various political assassinations, including what were then the recent murders of Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. As historian Steven Hayward notes in his book "The Age of Reagan," in the first six months of 1969, "there were nearly a hundred bombings, attempted bombings, or acts of arson on college campuses."

Also left out of this conventional narrative: conservative youth politics. Young Americans for Freedom, the group that groomed and galvanized a generation of conservative leaders, issued its manifesto, the Sharon Statement, on Sept. 11, 1960. The left-wing group Students for a Democratic Society released its far more famous Port Huron Statement two years later.

SDS was the more successful organization, culturally if not politically. This was in part because SDS had the sympathy of the press, but also because it had the more exciting story. They weren't merely rebels; they were in revolt against their own side. The SDSers had a radically different view of politics than older liberals.

Meanwhile, the young conservatives took their marching orders from the grown-ups, like William F. Buckley and M. Stanton Evans. The Sharon Statement derived its name from the location of YAF's first meeting: Buckley's home in Sharon, Conn. The manifesto, written by Evans, clocked in at 368 words. The Port Huron Statement rambled on for more than 50 pages.

This disparity can be explained both philosophically and sociologically. The young conservatives hailed from more blue-collar backgrounds, and they self-consciously aligned themselves with eternal truths and the wisdom of the ancients. The young liberals, who tended to be the children of elites, sought to reinvent the wheel, rejecting not just the ancients but also the generation that came before them.

Ever since, young conservatives have been inclined to take cues from their elders. But that seems to be changing.

In the current issue of the Weekly Standard, Ben Shapiro has a fascinating essay on the profound divide between young and old on the right. Older conservatives are almost unanimous in their support of Donald Trump's presidency. Meanwhile, a staggering 82 percent of Republican and Republican-leaning 18- to 24-year-olds want Trump to be challenged for the nomination in 2020, while 74 percent of Republicans over 65 don't. Sizable majorities of GOP voters between the ages of 24 and 44 also want a primary challenge.

Shapiro argues persuasively that young conservatives care about character and values, while older ones have largely abandoned such concerns, preferring solid policy victories and perceived wins in the war on political correctness.

What explains the opposing visions? Part of it, Shapiro writes, is the usual tendency of young people to gravitate toward libertarianism and idealism.

But there's another reason: Young people understand that some of the things old people see as "political correctness" aren't necessarily the product of a Marxist virus that somehow escaped a laboratory at Berkeley. Some of it reflects an attempt to craft decent manners in the increasingly diverse and egalitarian society that young people actually live in.

It may be time to play some Buffalo Springfield, because there is something happening here. As pollster Kristen Soltis Anderson notes, also in the Standard, the GOP has a grave problem with younger voters in part because it is almost wholly dependent on white voters, and white Americans represent an ever-shrinking slice of the youth vote, which will only become more important as the baby boomers throw off this mortal coil.

If the GOP has any hope of winning over non-conservative younger voters, it will be because young conservatives continue to break with their traditional role as dutiful soldiers for their movement's elders.

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