

What Went Wrong?

One could say that younger-generation-bashing is as old as the Republic. It provides certain satisfactions for the elders and, presumably, due warning to the next age cohort. During the 1950s, for example, *Time* decried a Silent Generation of college graduates; Tom Wolfe harpooned the "Me Generation" of the 1970s; others have happily targeted the "Young Urban Professionals" of this decade. But here, humorist P. J. O'Rourke, 40, looks askance at his *own* peers—America's much-publicized Baby Boom children of suburbia who, he says, first proclaimed their idealism, then traded in protest for consumerism, and a year ago were stunned by Wall Street's sudden "melt-down."

by P. J. O'Rourke

Ever since the stock market went to the bathroom a year ago, a lot of us have been pretty busy—talking our broker pals down from window ledges and convincing friends in the junk bond business to shut off the Porsche and open the garage door. We've been so busy that we may not have noticed that Black Monday, Blue Tuesday, Black-and-Blue Wednesday, etc. marked the end of an era. Neo-poverty means curtains for the Now Generation, a.k.a. the Dr. Spock Brats. Everybody born between WWII and the early '60s is going to have to grow up. It's all over now, Baby Boom.

Of course, the collapse of the Reagan Pig-Out wasn't the only thing that did us Boomers in. There was massive drug-taking, which turned out to be a bad idea. Maybe drugs make you a better person, but only if you believe in heaven and think John Belushi could get past the

doorman. And having sex with everyone we could think of—this broke up our first two marriages and gave most of us chronic venereal diseases and the rest of us obituaries. And then there was us, just being ourselves—"finding out who we are," "getting in touch with our feelings," "fulfilling our true inner potential"—frightening stuff. You'll notice that this year we all ran out to see *Fatal Attraction* so we could moon over a nuclear family and cheer for traditional morals. It seems like that boring middle-class suburbia where we grew up was swell after all. The problem is, we've spent all our money on cocaine and Reeboks and we can't afford it.

What went wrong? We were the generation of hope; the generation that was going to change the world; the biggest, richest, best-educated generation in the history of America—the biggest, rich-



It seems like only yesterday I was OK, you were OK.

est, best-educated spot in this or any other galaxy. Nothing was too good for us. It took thousands of doctors and psychiatrists to decide whether we should suck our thumbs or all our toes too. Our every childhood fad had global implications. One smile at Davy Crockett and forests were denuded in the search for raccoon-tail hats. When we took up Hula Hoops, the planet bobbed in its orbit. Our transistor radios drowned out the music of the spheres. A snuffle from us and *Life* magazine was sick in bed for a month. All we had to do was hold a sit-in and governments were toppled from the Beijing of Mao Zedong to the Cleveland of Dennis Kucinich. "We are the world," we shouted just a couple of years ago. And just a couple of years ago we were. How did we wind up so old? So fat? So confused? So *broke*?

The truth is our generation was spoiled rotten from the start.

We spent the entire 1950s on our butts in front of the television while

mom fed us Twinkies and Ring-Dings through strawberry Flavor Straws and dad ransacked the toy stores looking for 100 mph streamlined Schwinn's, Daisy air howitzers, Lionel train sets larger than the New York Central system, and other novelties to keep us amused during the few hours when Pinky Lee and "My Friend Flicka" weren't on the air.

When we came of age in the 1960s, we found the world wasn't as perfect as Mr. Greenjeans and Mrs. Cleaver said it would be, and we threw a decade-long tantrum. We screamed at our parents, teachers, the police, the president, Congress, and the Pentagon. We threatened to hold our breath (as long as the reefer stayed lit) and not cut our hair until poverty, war, and injustice were ended.

That didn't work. So we whiled away the '70s in an orgy of hedonism and self-absorption, bouncing from ashram to bedroom to disco to gym, at a speed made possible only by ingesting vast quantities of Inca Scratch-N-Sniff.

Even this proved unsatisfying, so we elected President Reagan and tried our hand at naked greed. We could have it all—career, marriage, job, children, BMW, Rolex, compact disc player, another marriage, more children, and a high-growth, high-yield, no-load mutual fund. Actually, for a while, it looked like we *could* have it all. As long as we didn't mind also having a national debt the size of the Crab Nebula, an enormous underclass making its living from five-cent beverage can deposits, and currency that the Japanese use to blow their noses. But now our economy has the williwaws, and our Youth Culture has arthritis, Alzheimer's, and gout. Life's big VISA card bill has come due at last.

The Baby Boom has reached middle age. It's time for us to pause, time to reflect, time to . . . OH, GOD, DARLING DON'T DO IT WITH A GUN—WE JUST REDECORATED THE BATHROOM!!! . . . time to evaluate the contributions that we, as a generation, have made to a world that presented us with so many remarkable and even unique advantages. Contributions such as . . . uh . . . um . . . BZZZZZZZZZ *Time's Up!* Well, some of the Beatles' songs are really great. (Although, technically, the Beatles aren't part of the Baby Boom.) And there's that first Tom Robbins novel, *Another Roadside Attraction*. That was good, I think. I mean I was very stoned when I read it. And . . . and . . . New Coke?

Wait a minute, I hear dissenting noises. Civil Rights, you say? But the Civil Rights Movement was founded by people a lot older than us. Harriet Tubman, for in-

stance. We *did* start the Peace Movement. That was a big success. The Vietnam War only lasted another eight or 10 years, once we got the Peace Movement going. Then, darn it, the Communists took over South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and killed everybody they could get their hands on, just like General Westmoreland, that pig, said they would. So I don't think we can count the Peace Movement as a major contribution, especially not as far as the former citizens of Phnom Penh are concerned.

Our political commitment, however, really changed things. You can tell by the quality of the presidents that we used to have, such as Truman and Eisenhower, compared to the quality of the presidents that we got as soon as the Baby Boom was old enough to vote, such as Carter and Reagan. And our idealism has made a difference. Ever since Live-Aid, all the Ethiopians have had to do the Jane Fonda work-out to keep from larding up around the middle.

It is true that our generation was the first to take feminism seriously. That's because old-timey feminists used to worry about boring things such as voting rights and legal status. But Boomer Women put some real life in the issues by emphasizing upscale grabbiness, pointless careerism, and insane arguments about pronoun antecedents. Fitness is another trend pioneered by the Boom. Millions of us are leading empty, useless, pitiful lives and lifting weights and eating fiber to make those lives last longer. Also, the computer revolution—we invented a brilliant matrix of complex and intricate software programs that al-

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low us to compile, cross-reference, and instantly access all the nothing that we know. Finally, there's our creativity—our wild, innovative artistic gifts—surely a legacy to the ages. Huh? Huh? Sorry, I couldn't hear you. I had the new L. L. Cool J *Bigger and Deffer* tape turned all the way up on my Walkman.

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Let's face it, our vaunted rebellion against bourgeois values meant we didn't want to clean the bathroom. All our mystical enlightenments are now printed in Hallmark cards with pictures of unicorns on them. Our intellectual insights led to a school system that hasn't taught anybody how to read in 15 years. All we've done for the disadvantaged is gentrify the crap out of their neighborhoods. And now we're about to lose our jobs.

Do we have any skills or anything? No. Complaining, playing Donkey Kong, and rolling joints with E-Z Wider papers are the only things this generation has ever been able to do. Will anyone feel sorry for us? No. We've been making pests of ourselves for four decades, hogging the limelight, making everybody feel un-hip and out of it. The Earth has had a bellyful of us. We'll be selling kiwi fruit on the street and rattling microchips in a tin cup and people will *laugh*.

We're the generation whose heroes were Howdy Doody, Jerry Rubin, Big Bird, and Ivan Boesky. We deserved the stock market crash, and herpes and the Betty Ford Clinic, besides. We're jerks. We're clowns. We're 40 and still wearing jeans. Nobody takes us seriously . . .

Wait a minute. *Serious*. That's it. Oh, man, this will really bug the squares! What we do is we all start wearing dumpy corduroy sport coats and cheap, shiny, navy-blue wash pants and Hush Puppies. We get half-glasses and wear them way down on the end of our noses. We read Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, Kant, all those guys. We call it *The New Seriousness*. The media will wig-out. We'll be all over network TV again.

Dig this—we start going to church, not Moonie church or born-again church but real Episcopalian church, every Sunday. We invite each other over to afternoon teas and discuss the novels of Thomas Mann. We take up the cello. We do the *London Times* crossword puzzle in ink. We admire Woody Allen's *recent* movies. We vote in local elections.

We'll be *crazy* serious—international superstars of, like, heavy, pensive eggheadery. We fire David Letterman and replace him with Jean-Paul Sartre. (Is he still alive? Well, somebody like that.) Shoot MTV videos for Handel and Rimsky-Korsakov. Do a feature movie about the life of Euripides with the sound track in ancient Greek. There are 76 million of us. Everybody's going to want a books-on-tape cassette of Bertrand Russell and A. N. Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* for their car. We'll make a fortune! We'll be famous! And we'll change the world!

The New Seriousness—it's bitchin', it's far-out, it's rad to the max, it's *us*. Gotta go now. Gotta call Merrill Lynch and buy stock in the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra.