

CHAPTER 4 THE MAKING OF GENERATION ME

DRAFT

“When John Kennedy said in his inaugural address that ‘the torch has been passed on to a new generation,’ he was speaking of the young men and women who had survived World War II. But he also seemed to be speaking to my generation, signaling that we no longer had to play by just by the rules of our elders; we could find our own way through life and career” (Tom Brokaw, 2001)

“Either you believe the 1960s destroyed America, or it cured it.” (C. Kaiser, 2011).

As seventy-six million Baby Boomers came of age, America looked forward with enormous optimism. An older generation was soon to be replaced by a young, optimistic, hope filled generation who would force this country to live up to its ideals and promises. They would make America even better. The battle that ensued was fundamentally a fight between the conservative attitudes and behaviors of one generation against the individualistic free-spirited values and practices of their children. Both sides lost.

Having lived through the Great Depression and World War II, the Boomers parents were naturally conservative. They believed in a common good and collective identity. They felt that everyone was better off if everyone cooperated, worked together, and, in a very real sense, tried to be like one another. These attitudes and behaviors help explain the massive success of the American economy in the 1950s in part because they allowed companies to build more effective and efficient production techniques and offered them massive and rather homogeneous consumer markets. From Levittown to Coca-Cola, Americans wanted what other Americans wanted. At the same time, they were not only willing but in some sense eager, to follow the rules - just as they had done during the war.

Sure, things were not perfect, but you shouldn't expect perfection. "We found out in the fifties that if you got up in the morning and went to work and did a good day's work that things got better. You got promoted or you got more money. You were able to buy more furniture, you could have more children, the children could have better clothes. And life just improved. We knew it was because you went to work. But, I'm not sure our children realized that. They saw simply that the clothes got better, the house got bigger, the neighborhood got nicer... I have a strong suspicion that what happened in the late 60s was that the kids who rebelled took it for granted that life would improve *automatically.*"ⁱ

Their children saw this as crushing homogeneity. Having been brought up in a world in which they did not have to worry about the future, they rejected the gray flannel suits of their parents. Whereas their parents felt it important to keep up with the Joneses and to “fit in” at the office and with their neighbors, their children came to worship their individuality and believed that they were special. They wanted to be different from everyone else. The Baby Boomers saw their parents’ desire to behave according to strict social norms as closemindedness. Their parents saw their children's openness, freedom, and willingness to experiment as not just breaking the rules, but corrosive to the foundations of what they believed made America great.

“A counterculture was developing that rejected the conventional mores and social norms. Many sensed that their parents’ lifestyle was stifling and outdated and responded by resisting the mainstream middle-class values. Called “hippies,” they formed a counterculture based on the ideals of love and peace and rejection of materialism. Profoundly idealistic, social activism provided a sense of purpose and a feeling of community that previously had been missing.” “Psychedelic drugs, particularly LSD, also played a significant role in the formation of the counterculture. Many followed Timothy Leary’s advice to “tune in, turn on, and drop out”- that is, to take drugs, raise their spiritual consciousness, as well as drop out of school, work, and society. Hippies and non-hippies alike experimented with drugs.”ⁱⁱ

As Eric Burdon of *The Animals* tells it: “I firmly believed we could change the world.” He recalls, “We were experimenting with drugs, we were experimenting with relationships, we were exploring with music.” Arlo Guthrie, put it this way: “We had reached a period where our adherence to traditional thoughts and traditional music and adherence to custom and to authority had brought us to the brink of a catastrophe and a global disaster, to the likes of which the world had never even thought about. And enough people said no, we are not doing this anymore, we are not doing this thoughtlessly anymore, we cannot trust authority.”

ⁱ David Hoffman, 'How 50s Parents Felt About Their Kids', in *Making Sense of the Sixties*, ed. by David Hoffman (United States, 1991).. In 1991, Andrew and Jane Takas were interviewed on David Hoffman’s documentary program “Making Sense of the Sixties.” They recall their experience raising children during the 1950s in postwar America.

ⁱⁱ Julianna Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*, (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998). and *Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*, p. 252.