**The Baby Boom Generation: an Introduction**

**from** Don't Trust Anyone Over 30: The First Four Decades of the Baby Boom

by Howard Smead

Welcome to the most egocentric generation in the history of mankind. This book presents its history through the vignettes, sayings, slogans and quotations that shaped and characterized our rambunctious cohort. The dialogue ― much of it shouted! ― the trauma, the pleasure and the pain of the times will fall into perspective as you ease from memory lane to the impeachment follies. Much of that spectacle was generational. The trial was a right-wing Woodstock. But more about that later.

We've raised more than our share of hell during the half-century we've been on the planet. We took to the streets to protest everything from civil rights to animal rights to foreign wars. And now, in ultimate irony, we're at the forefront of the reaction against much of that upheaval. Over the years, we've witnessed a lot of history, made some of it and, along the way, produced a pop culture treasure trove of aphorisms to accompany it all. So many slogans, sayings and quotations that, when laced together, they paint a striking portrait of growth and change. But these are not mere slogans. Our history lies in our music and albums, in books, TV shows and movies, and in remarks by people who most deeply influenced us. They represent key events, in other words, that have become part of our collective subconscious.

From the placid 50s ("Aw, gee, Wally"), to the idealistic stirrings of the 60s ("Ask not what your country can do for you ..."), the disillusionment and despair that came a few years later ("Up Against the Wall, motherfucker"), through reaction ("There you go again") and counter-revolution ("The Era of Big Government is Over" and "Soccer Moms"), our story is as fascinating as it is rich.

"*When we were young, we didn't trust anyone over 30.*

*Now that we're over 30, we don't trust anyone at all.  
Not even ourselves."*

We grew up the most affluent generation ever, protected in suburbs and small towns, enjoying greater health and expecting longer, fuller lives than any of our predecessors. We are more idealistic than the Founding Fathers and as zealous as abolitionists.

We lived through the longest and greatest period of national prosperity, the nation's first losing war, and its most culturally eccentric period  only to end up gazing at the world we've inherited with a sense of longing, unfulfilled promise, and self-doubt. We grew by turns more idealistic, less realistic, and, when our dreams didn't pan out quite the way we wanted, more disillusioned with our country and alienated from it than seems possible given the privileged lives bestowed upon us. We're as immature as Peter Pan.

From our infancy, the fertile fields of opportunity lay beneath our feet, offering all their growing wonders, asking that we use them to the fullest. Hoping to create a generation free from the fear and deprivation they suffered, our parents pampered and protected us. In doing so they inadvertently gave birth to two separate waves of self-absorbed activists, one leftist, the other rightist, that has produced a continuing series of cultural revolutions and counterrevolutions the ultimate consequences of which none of us may live to see.

Soon we will run all the country's institutions, make lots more money, experience an unprecedented amount of leisure, redefine retirement and old age when we do, perhaps inventing another new age category  only to face the possibility of people under thirty in the streets shaking their fists at us, throwing down the generational gauntlet, challenging us to rise to our golden promise.

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 It's impossible to deny the distinctiveness of the 76 million American babies born during the post-World War II baby boom. After all, we only set out to save the world. We're still at it, too. What are we to make of our anxious generation? All the attention we've received, you'd think we were born with life in our hip pocket. Just what exactly is the Baby Boom Generation? Who are we and where did we get our Olympian ego?

First things first. Why is it called the Baby Boom? Simple, because of a boom in babies! Seventeen million extra babies, in fact. That's how many more babies were born than would have been had our mothers paid any attention to the fertility rates of their mothers.

Why didn't they? The experts were predicting a continuing decline in the birth rate. But their husbands had just gotten back from World War II and wanted to settle into the old and safe routine that involved hearth, home and children, lots of children. Their wives, our mothers, were in full agreement. The amorous burst that followed World War II became a freak occurrence caused by the conjunction of youthful optimism, material affluence, victory in one war and fear of losing another. You want to blame the baby boom on one person? Blame Adolph Hitler. His activities in Europe distorted the family cycle in America. To that you might add a dash of Stalin. Because in the 50s, the Cold War with its emphasis on family strength  and Mom at home, pregnant and in the kitchen  sustained the boom well into the 1960s.

VE Day came in May 1945. VJ Day followed in August after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Sixteen million GIs came home a short time later and got down to business. Nineteen years later when the birthing boom subsided there were 76 million more natural born Americans.

During the first year of the boom 3.4 million babies arrived  at the time a record number for one year. Our mothers were popping out kids at the rate of 338,000 a month, 100,000 more a month than the previous year. In 1947 the number increased over 1945 by one million. From 1954 on, over four million little boomers appeared on the scene each year, peaking at 4.3 million in 1957 and finally exhausting itself in 1965, when births fell below four million, where they have stayed.

All those born during the demographic bulge between 1946 and 1964 are Baby Boomers. Most are proud to be included in what was once considered an elite cohort. Rush Limbaugh, most notably, is not. But he's our generation's leading horse's ass anyway. According to the last census, our ranks included 38,503,000 women and 38,038,000 men. Sixty one million of us are white. Nine million black, and about six million Hispanic, Asian and Indian. In 1996, counting deaths and 8 million foreign born boomers, our generation reached almost 78 million and may continue increasing for a few more years. Almost as many of us are dying these days as are immigrating. We account for 31% of the population, a figure that will drop to 20% in a few decades as we start dropping out for good and baby boomer babies take their place in the sun.

The oldest of us are turning fifty at the rate of one every seven seconds. The youngest are looking at their thirties with the cold realization that they're no longer kids. The majority of us went to elementary and secondary school in the 50s and college in the 60s. For the most part we were old enough to serve in Vietnam or have friends who did. We entered the working world, adulthood, that is, during the 70s. At the same time, while some of us were getting married and starting families, many of us, especially women, held off in favor of careers until the mid-80s.

Those of us born after 1957, members of the second wave, don't feel nearly as strong a generational identity as the first wave. The feeling of specialness that gave rise in the 60s to the mistrust of our elders known as the Generation Gap largely preceded them. Many boomers born in the 60s have more in common with our successors (and antagonists) in Generation X, who were born between 1965 and 81, Think of it this way: First wave boomers became hippies, second wave punks. But both expressions of dissatisfaction with the world came from our generation, even though they were often at polar opposites within the legions of generational misfits.

There is also a group of pre-boomers who share the era with us. They were born between 1941 and 1945. This leading edge was very much part of the generation that came of age in the 1960s the Vietnam Generation. Or, the under-twenty-five generation that became Time Magazine's 1966 Man [sic] of the Year. That would include Newt Gingrich, Bob Dylan, Tom Hayden, Oliver North, Joni Mitchell, Angela Davis and Bill Bradley and H. Rap Brown and the Beatles. Technically they're not Boomers. Still, as youths they were shaped by the same forces.

The leading edge and the first wave came of age under the influence of the Civil Rights Movement, the war in Vietnam, and profound economic prosperity. The second wave arrived in the 70s during Watergate, the oil embargo, gas lines, runaway inflation, and vastly lowered economic expectations. No wonder some became punks. Unlike early boomers, second wavers, now in their 30s, learned quickly that, Bill Gates notwithstanding, they probably wouldn't achieve the same standard of living as their parents or the same degree of economic security as older boomers. For them the American Dream assumed entirely different dimensions. First wave boomers equaled or surpassed their parents' standard of living. The second wave has not and most likely will not. And if they haven't already, someday soon they might be forced to rely on their parents for financial support and perhaps a place to live until they get themselves together.

As a result of the protest ferment in which we became ensnared, our generation is considered to be liberal socially and politically. Although we think of ourselves that way, we're not. In 1975 46% of those boomers old enough to be surveyed called themselves liberal. Ten years later that percentage fell to 29%. Now it's below 20%. Besides that and contrary to commonly held assumptions, the second wave tends to be more liberal than the first wave and leading-edgers. Time might prove this simply a factor of age. Early boomers are firmly in their 40s, a time of creeping conservatism.

The second wave will be there soon enough and might change when they get there.

Despite thousands of hairy-headed hippies in the streets protesting against the War, most of us supported the American effort in Southeast Asia at least through the Cambodian Incursion and the Kent State Massacre in 1970. And we damn sure supplied the bulk of the one million GIs that served there. Although not everyone who crossed the pond did so willingly, for the most part those who went did their duty as they believed it should be done and, if they lived, suffered the consequences from their wrathful peers and neglectful elders.

On the whole, we disliked LBJ and his Great Society, even though we grew to embrace many of its programs. The first two times we voted, we voted Republican: for Nixon twice, then Carter once. We loved the Gipper and gave him our votes. A plurality favored Bush over Dukakis. We voted for Clinton even though we have a negative fixation on the first Boomer president. But, then who doesn’t besides his dog? Put simply, a whole lot of us hate both him and his smart, successful wife Hillary. Possibly it's because they're such super-achievers. More probably it's because Bill Clinton's humble origins he's the first white trash president since Andrew Jackson and Abe Lincoln destroyed any notions the rest of us might have that we lack the wealth and status to become president. We find it hard to forgive him for surpassing us. The Silent Generation that came of age in the 50s has failed so far to produce a president. He's surpassed them as well.

Despite our dislike of Clinton and ambivalence about Barack Obama, the most revealing vote remains the '72 election, where we supported Tricky Dick over George McGovern, who was supposed to be the candidate of the young. Our candidate!

Still, our radical and reformist politics continue to give us our cachet. And for good reason. We grew up in a bigoted society and changed it to a fairer, more equitable place to live. The activist minority of our generation shortened the war in Vietnam and made the plight of the less fortunate and the condition of the natural environment urgent national issues.

 But it doesn't end there. The activist beat goes on. Today we make up a substantial portion of the shock troops and elected officials of the Radical Right that dismantled the welfare state and crimped the style of federal bureaucrats, many of whom are fellow boomers. These neo-radical boomers are no less committed, no less zealous in their political and cultural beliefs than their counterculture brethren. If it indeed turns out that our generational legacy is revolutionary change, that revolutionary change may well be conservative/right wing not liberal/leftist. Some of the same people who took part in street demonstrations now attend conservative fundraisers. Many others though are new to the business of activism.

Any way you look at it, the effects are the same. We're also the cohort that revolutionized popular culture with rock 'n' roll music, which is used now to sell everything from Chevrolets to running shoes, stock and bonds, to a career in the Armed Forces.

Where we once sat cross-legged in black-lighted rooms sharing bong hits, we now share anti-drug literature at public forums. We did more than Just Say No. We became crusaders  again. Where we once mocked religion as hypocritical, many of those same boomers now embrace enthusiastic, fundamentalist Christianity and look down their pious noses at those who don't. Non-believers are "off the bus," not on it. Once upon a time, if it felt good we did it  naked, in groups, in the road, where ever the spirit took us  we now jerk our children out of R-rated movies at the local cineplex. No way they're going to see sex scenes. We did it, but we're not letting them even watch it. At the same time our alarm over "hate speech" and pornography on the Internet has led to the most significant of our many value shifts. Where we once championed free speech, free expression and the right to "do your own thing in your own time," we now seek to limit free speech on computer networks and on college campuses. Both are conservative attitudes even if the cult of "political correctness" comes straight out of the left and radical feminism.

Although we suffer from a profound conservative-liberal anomie perhaps as sharp as the North-South or pro- and anti-slavery split before the Civil War, we remain a cohort. What other generation has been treated as an entity unto itself, breathing the fires of its identity into every national nook and cranny? What other generation has received so much special attention?

Pampered? Self-righteous? You betcha.

We invented a new stage of life ― youth ― and the culture that surrounds it. Because of us, teenagers don't grow directly into adulthood. They learn to spread things out a little, to enjoy their youthful vigor, daring and optimism into their early 30s ... sometimes much later. The Peter Pans among us are introducing yet another age group, that has been called "mid-youth," over thirty men and women whose outlook on life remains youthful, who enjoy the idiosyncrasies of being young and are open to new ideas and trends. They love Seinfeld and The X-Files; they buy lots of rock CDs. And they have a bevy of 30-something actors to serve as role models, from Sandra Bullock (mid-30s) to Michael Richie (late 40s).

We appeared at the right time, in sufficient numbers, and under the most auspicious economic circumstances imaginable. We're the best informed generation ever, and are likely to remain so. Vietnam prompted many of us to go to college if for no other reason than to avoid the draft. Black boomers were the first generation in most black families to go to college. The move toward racial equality also opened the campus door to women. The money was there for all of us thanks to NDEA '58, which granted low-cost college loans, no questions asked. Because of Vietnam we're much more preoccupied with and pessimistic about world problems and our involvement in them than Generation X (1965 - 1981), The Silent Generation (1925 - 1945) or the G.I. Generation (1901 - 1924). The Millennial Generation (1982 - 2000) is still too young to know or care.

We've retained our deep skepticism of authority to the point of exaggerated informality. Listened to talk radio lately? We continue to reject or at least disparage authority at every turn. That will change in a few decades when we're all in our 50s and 60s. Then we'll be in full power and will exercise commanding influence over business, politics, religion, media and culture.

We still have trouble with formality and the dignity that goes with it. We insist on first names. Compare a Bill Gates to a J.P. Morgan, for example. Imagine J.P. Morgan conversing via e-mail! Although we question authority, we specialize in authoritative moral wisdom right down to how-to books on just about everything we can think of. Although our antipathy extends to lawyers, banks and credit cards, we continue to be free-spending, heedless over-age mall rats, playing the grasshopper to the parental ant. We save less. We buy more. And we put it all on our credit cards. We love to buy things. From catalogues or glittery malls. Our kids may be mall rats, but, by God, we're the mall mavens for whom those palaces of shopping splendor were built.

We're fools for natural foods, or at least anything without artificial flavors or chemical additives. In this we stand alone among the four to five generations with whom we share the earth. This love for things green and organic most likely stems from our craving for the authentic. "Just one word, Benjamin. Plastic." Remember that line from The Graduate? We took it to heart, although not the way it was intended. We abhor anything plastic or phoney. Whether it be food, people, or products. Ironically, we have surrendered one generational mantle. The Ecology Movement is no longer ours. GenXers are much more concerned about the environment than we are. Hey, we have children to raise.

We are more than likely to insist upon strict discipline for them  a reaction no doubt from the amazing leniency we experienced. We like to rise early because we are hard workers, and we have no fear of Hi Tech. Quite the opposite. We wholeheartedly embrace it. We're responsible for home computers which are truly re-shaping the world. We're more likely to own and use one at home than either pre-boomers or GenXers or Millenials. We were young when computers appeared. And once R2D2 and C3PO helped us get over our antipathy for Hal 9000, we embraced them fervently just like everything else we embrace. Nothing halfway about us. Never has been, never will be.

As a consequence of the fast pace we keep, we feel stress more than our parents and let everybody know it. Did you think we'd keep it to ourselves? Our high divorce rate and delayed marriages have run their course. These days most of us are married, including second wavers. You'll find us in a family with kids, most of which are under eighteen. Over six million of us are already grandparents. Half of us have been through a divorce. And most of our children have seen their parents get divorced.

Besides glutting the political market place with radical ideas, we also glutted the job market: 75% of baby-boom women have entered the labor force. Our numbers caused a major building boom that drove up housing prices. Our parents had to pay for more schools and teachers. Now, as we send our kids off each morning, the decline in births (the baby bust) means there are too many schools. In our fear that our kids might be getting inadequate educations, we're withdrawing them and teaching them at home, over-raising them, over-coddling, over-organizing their lives, over-protecting, over-coordinating everything they do, and then complaining we don't spend enough "quality time" with them. With schedules like ours, who has time?

Where our parents merely indulged us, we boomers are freaking out about our children. Having children has led us to create an Anxiety Gap where the burden of caring for them has reduced our highly prized generational sense of individualism and personal freedom. Over half of first wavers pull down over $40,000 a year and own a home similar to the one in which they grew up. Most husbands and wives work. What's more, the first wave has not yet reached the peak of its earning powers. That will come in about five years as more fall between 45 and 54. Few of us are preparing adequately for our golden years, most likely because we remember all too vividly our youth, which we thought would never end.

Each of us has held about ten jobs, is healthy and in fairly good shape. Although we're facing heart-disease, high blood pressure, hearing and sight impairment, all of which become a real danger after age 45, most of us are not quite there yet. In fact, now that we've got some age on us, we have the money, the time, and the will to join a gym and workout. As for sexual appetite, we're all old enough to be concerned about its possible decline. And young enough that it remains merely a concern.

Only 23% of us participated in the counterculture. We smoked or were exposed to marijuana. Some went beyond that to other drugs, but not nearly as many as we think. For most of us, drugs were something we did when we were in college. The real significance of illegal drugs was that we took them at all. Many who did, did so to separate ourselves from our parents for whom drugs was a bigger social taboo than sex. Fewer still actually dropped out of society and lived in communes. Most boomers enjoyed and benefited in various ways  from the sexual revolution. We renounced the double standard and aggressively, for a while, sought to remove it from our lives. However, it's the younger boomers who streaked across college campuses and were ultimately more relaxed about sex and sexuality.

Pity the second wave. Those of us who came of age in the 70s feel excluded from the endless self-adulation among baby-boomers. They suffered when the sexual revolution hit the mainstream. Their parents practiced wife swapping and open marriages. Their parents went to sex clubs. Their parents smoked dope. Their parents tried to let their thinning hair grow long, wore striped bell bottoms and love beads. Their parents got divorced. Parents of the first wave stayed straight, married and at home. That made a huge difference because those boomers born on the down slope are even more cynical than their older peers.

But let us not kid ourselves, overall we've had it pretty good. We've made our mark. We began our lives as the indulged "Little Emperors and Empresses" of our households. We emerged from our protected neighborhoods intensely idealistic and so ill-disciplined we expected social change to come as easily as ordering from an F.A.O. Schwartz catalogue. We became rooted in time ― the Sixties ― rather than in region or place, and we hated hypocrisy and injustice. If we didn't get our political way, we threw a public tantrum until we got tired of that and tried something else such as eastern mysticism, spiritual cults, fundamentalist Christianity. And finally, conservative politics. The Tea Party Movement is made up mainly of disgruntled Baby Boomers!

All because we are still blessed with the calling to better ourselves and the world around us.