

The “Greatest Generation” and What Boomers Should Do!

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In all fairness, one ought to spread the blame around: the editors of the *Atlantic*, and the mainstream media in general, are even more culpable than Michael Kinsley for promulgating the absurd fictions of Mr. K’s “The Least We Can Do”—the cover piece in the current issue of the once notable *Atlantic*.

Here’s how it begins: “Self-absorbed, self-indulged, and self-loathing, the Baby Boom generation at last has the chance to step out of the so-called Greatest Generation’s historical shadow.”

Immediately, we’re off and running with two concoctions: that Boomers are “self-absorbed, self-indulged, and self-loathing,” and that they are sad-sack shadows of their fathers—the “Greatest Generation” who fought WW II.

I’ve hated that term “Greatest Generation” since it was popularized by Tom Brokaw to hawk his book of the same title. Who was, er, “self-absorbed” Brokaw to anoint that generation of WW II vets? There was some silliness about their “answering the call,” being ready to sacrifice (and destroy) life and limb in the great struggle against Fascism. Well, frankly, my “old man” was in that war, and he, like most of the other Americans involved in it, did not go voluntarily—he was drafted—and he was not at all happy about fighting “the rich man’s war.”

So, it’s a question of perception. How can a generation, a people, a person be great, if their perception of what they are doing is wrong? Most American G.I.’s had no more clear concept of who or what they were fighting for than their younger brothers and sons did during the Korean and Vietnam wars; nor, for that matter, than their grandsons and great grandson (!) now have in our Middle East wars.

Are soldiers fighting in ignorance to uphold the privileges of the elite greater than the informed and aware people who fought to oppose a corrupt uber-system of economic exploitation and the “military-industrial” complex that supported it? Frankly, I’d cast my vote for the well-informed, inquisitive parties who opposed the conventional views and fought, and sometimes died, for justice. (Was General Patton a member of “the Greatest Generation,” but Martin Luther King was not?)

Next we find Kinsley shuffling the Boomers offstage: “As they prepare to leave... Boomers themselves concede that things have not exactly gone according to script.” Well, thanks, but no thanks. I’m 64, and I plan to keep bugging and gadflying the crazy, authoritarian types for three more decades, and maybe more than that. And I plan to keep my faculties intact—shunning “fast food,” going green, exposing corruption, learning as much as I can,

and passing on the learning.

So... after Kinsley's above pompositives, just what does he claim is "the least" Boomers should do? He forges on: "Nobody actually wants the Boomers dead (or at least nobody has been impolitic enough to say so), but many wouldn't mind if they took early retirement." Kinsley is still hustling the Boomers-soon-to-be geezers to Barnum's "Egress." He back-steps a bit, recalls some of the good things Boomers actually accomplished—civil rights, technological revolutions, defeating Communism "on their way out the door." Then, the sucker-punch again:

"But even if the anti-Boomer critique is a bum rap, Boomers are right to feel at least a bit like a failed generation, because they—at least those who consciously thought of themselves as part of a generation—had hopes. They had an agenda. Peace and love—whatever happened to them? It is a crushing disappointment that Boomers entered adulthood with Americans killing and dying halfway around the world, and now, as Boomers reach retirement and beyond, our country is doing the same damned thing."

So... the fact that Americans are killing and dying halfway around the world is somehow a consequence of Boomers being a "failed generation"? What kind of card trick is this? How did the blame shift from those responsible for the killing and dying to those who have been trying to stop it?

"We're still spry," Kinsley assures us—suddenly up on his Viagra, I guess—and, "It's not too late for a generational gesture, something that will be the equivalent of—if not actually equal to—our parents' sacrifice in fighting and winning World War II: some act of generosity or sacrifice that will inspire or embarrass the next generation."

So... we're still bashing ourselves—or measuring ourselves—against that "Greatest Generation." Hang down your head, Tom Dooley. Hang down your head and cry!

I might note here that at this point in my essay, I feel quite justified taking a few swipes at fellow journalist Kinsley, because, at this point in his essay he takes a mighty swipe at *Time's* correspondent, Joe Klein. Seems Klein was meditating on this very issue for his mag last year. What was Klein's "fantasy" of "a last political crusade" for the Boomers? A campaign to legalize marijuana!

Pardon me while I reach for my roach clip, but somehow that doesn't strike me as an awfully bad idea. Of course, returning back to mono-minded Kinsley we are alerted that Klein's crusade "will not strike many as the equivalent of fighting and winning World War II." (I dunno, Michael. It's all a matter of perspective!)

Next, Kinsley pooh-poohs another idea for "failed" Boomers to "redeem" themselves with a last crusade: voluntary social service. Boomers teaching, assisting in hospitals? Ha-ha! Don't make him laugh!

"So what do you give the country that has everything? You give it cash. The biggest peril Americans now face isn't Islamo-fascism. It's our own inability to live within our means.... We should pass on to the next generation an America that's free from debt. Instead of ignoring it... Boomers... should just grab the check and say, 'This one's on us.'"

That's his solution? Pardon me while I guffaw through the smoke!

And the card trickery continues and gets worse. Kinsley lets us know that he knows—wink, wink!—it was actually the “Greatest Generation” which was “primarily responsible for America’s debt crisis.” Now, follow the bouncing ball: these WW II vets, to whom we owe so much as a nation, were as smelly as their battle fatigues when it came to managing the nation’s money!

Weld the fiscal and monetary irresponsibility of the suddenly less than Greatest Generation to the spoiled-brat attitudes of the generic American and you’ve got our present “debt crisis”! Kinsley quotes from a “rant of a column” by ranter Anne Applebaum: “Americans—with their lawsuit culture, their safety obsession and, above all, their addiction to government spending programs—demand more from their government than just about anybody else in the world.... And if the price of their house drops, they will hold the government responsible for that, too.”

Poppycock! Compared to other wealthy nations, Americans have demanded and received much less from their government, much less from the Corporate State.

Next comes Kinsley’s litany of some truly scary calculations. Our national debt, now 62% of GDP, will hit 109% in 2025. And that figure doesn’t begin to reflect state debts, consumer debts, Medicare and Social Security shortfalls and debts.

Notice that in Kinsley’s litany, there is not a peep about the fact that 50 percent of US discretionary funding goes towards our “defense” budget, Homeland Security expenses, and maintaining about 1,000 military bases in some 180 countries.

Adding all the acknowledged debts together, Kinsley adduces a figure of \$14 trillion, and adds, “it’s not so much.”! Not so much, he avers, because “at least \$41 trillion will have been transferred from parents to children and grandchildren between 1998 and 2052. In the first half of that 54-years swap, “money will mostly be coming from the previous generation to the Boomers themselves.” And now, Kinsley’s coup d’ grace “solution” to our multiple woes: “Boomers could forswear all or part of this unearned inheritance. Or, more realistically, they could allow the government to tax it.”

I’m still guffawing!.... Kinsley acknowledges that critics of this sort of “estate tax” claim it’s a double-tax—once when earned and once when you die. But, that’s fine with him, because, as he consoles his fellow Boomers, “That’s what you do because you didn’t have to fight in World War II.”

So, this government that your generic American and favorably quoted Ann Applebaum love to rail against like spoiled kids screaming in the grocery aisles because mama won’t buy the Cocoa Puffs, this government is going to raise \$14 trillion in new “Boomer taxes,” and the Tea Partiers, the Christian Right, the Dems and Jon Stewart are going to go rah-rah-rah, Go team! This time you’ll cross the “I”’s and dot the “T”’s (or in this corporate-government’s case, probably the opposite!).

Kinsley’s pipe-smoking delusions get even worse. Next he takes on what used to be called “the third rail” of U.S. politics: Social Security. Say that “a couple dies leaving... half a million dollars, the risk they were insuring against—poverty and old age—evidently didn’t materialize. The money they received from Social Security... is instead passed along to their Boomer children.” So.... “Why shouldn’t they give it back?”

Let's tamper with Social Security, far and away the most popular social program in American history, where the American worker is getting some of the hard-earned money he has paid in taxes returned to him!

But Kinsley has one final card trick up his sleeve: You see, Americans spend far more money than other "advanced countries" on health care, but live shorter lives anyway. (Don't mention in that statistic, the lousy food, insipid culture, life-sapping anomie and isolation, guns, poverty, etc.) The obvious problem is that we "try to save people through heroic, expensive, long-shot efforts, most of which fail." Kinsley suggests that we stop trying to save poor old mom and pop and grandpa and let them die naturally in their 80s or 90s, "unlike the teens and 20-somethings who gave their lives in World War II."

At which point I must conclude, poor Kinsley has gone off the deep-end. What is the point of these eternal equations? WWII Generation vs Boomer Generation. What is that? Why not compare the WWII Generation to the Revolutionary Generation of Jefferson and Hamilton and figure out where the latter messed up? For that matter, why not compare our situation now to that of Renaissance Italy's or Pericles' Athens'?

Is some kind of strange guilt feeling, or some inferiority complex, supposed to extricate us from the miseries of the Great Collapse?

Fortunately, before encountering Kinsley's *apologia pro vita sua*, [The Global Economic Crisis: the Great Depression of the XXI Century](#) was gifted to me by a wise friend. Editors Michel Chossudovsky and Andrew Gavin Marshall have herein anthologized the writing of independent economists and thinkers who do the hard work of sourcing the reasons for the Great Collapse—and what we can really do about it.

First off, let's forget Kinsley's silly blame-game of spoiled Boomers getting their just desserts. In his 60-page overview, Chossudovsky traces the meltdown to financial deregulation and, basically, the "financialization" of modern-day capitalism. Deregulation (seriously begun under Reagan) led to the "speculative onslaught" on Black Monday, September 29, 2008. It's not about Boomers measuring their penises against their Dads', but it is about Wall Street's chicanery-insider trading, "spreading of misleading or false information" to stampede the little guy and extract his or her life savings. It's about creating bubbles in housing or, before that, dot.com stocks, and then bursting those bubbles with malice aforethought. It's about the centralization and consolidation of bank power through bankruptcies, mergers and acquisitions, and about the banks becoming more powerful than the government that's supposed to oversee it. It's about the privately owned Federal Reserve and the manipulation of the money supply to create panics and the deracination of the laboring classes through cycles of inflation, hyper-inflation and deflation—always redounding to the benefit of the elite, who metastasize in power way beyond our national borders. In 1999, "I-feel-your-pain" Bill Clinton signed the Financial Services Modernization Act and hell has been boiling over ever since as "commercial banks, brokerage firms, institutional investors and insurance companies could freely invest in each other's businesses as well as fully integrate their financial operations." The Superpower of the Free Market went poof!... and competition in the most serious realms of capital formation took on the dark hues of monopoly and oligopoly.

As with Dickens' England, the U.S. has been transforming itself into a kind of debtors' prisonhouse, and the jailers have been jangling the keys mightily loudly these past two years. As of this writing, more Americans now live in poverty in the Land of the Free than there are

Spaniards living in Spain.

I figure our “free-market” economy works out something like this: You’ve got 100 people and five boxes of hot, delicious pizza (and that’s all you’ve got to eat!). The first person—or the top-dog—gets 2 boxes to him/her/itself. The next 19 people get another 2 boxes to share. The “bottom” 80 peasants get 1 box to drool over. (It’s mostly about the drool!)

We are a nation under assault, but the real terrorists are home-grown oligopolists, men and women who run hedge funds and outsource American jobs to China, India, Brazil, Mexico, etc. (But for God’s sake, let’s not blame the exploited masses in Mexico, etc. They are our brothers and sisters, too; they are also victimized by an irrational, brutal, war-profiteering global system.)

Richard Cook has a chapter on “The Democratization of the Monetary System.” It reads, in part, like an Economic Bill of Rights, and he makes a strong case for encouraging Local Currencies and for Social Credit. We need an Economic Bill of Rights and we’ll need revolutionary perceptual adjustments and actions to make it real.

In fact, there are many good ideas in this anthology that includes some of my favorite writers on Economics: Ellen Brown, Mike Whitney, James Petras and Michael Hudson—men and women whose work I’ve read on some of the best progressive sites. And, there are others who are new to me, who, I have no doubt, will also enlighten.

Economics has been a forest with entangling vines and strange flora and fauna, full of mathematical formulae, recondite theories, and a lot of plain old nonsense. The “independent” economists—-independent, for the most part, of stultifying academic and foundation subvention and oversight—are striving to disentangle the vines and uproot the weeds.

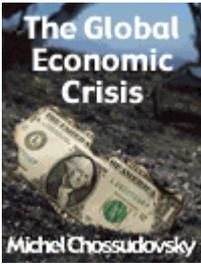
How did we get into this mess? There’s the old story of greed. It has always been there (and, No, Mr. Gecko, greed is NOT good.) The “real economy” has been dying before our eyes as the world’s capacity to produce products has overwhelmed our capacity to consume the pretty baubles that have crowded out life’s essentials. We’ve raped Mother Earth so that an elite, global few could live aristocratic lives while the children of our world have scavenged garbage heaps for scraps of food.

This is the real challenge of our time—not some kind of specious comparison with the nominated “Greatest Generation.” The real challenge has always been to be informed, to be aware, to be decent guardians and protectors of the commonweal. The real challenge is to know ourselves... and to become our best selves.

Gary Corseri’s articles, poems, fiction, and dramas have appeared in hundreds of online and hard-copy venues, including *Dissident Voice*, *CounterPunch*, *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Redbook Magazine*, and *CommonDreams*. He has performed his work at the Carter Presidential Library and Museum. He has published two novels (*Holy Grail*, *Holy Grail and A Fine Excess*), a literary anthology (*Manifestations*, edited), two collections of poems, and his dramas have been on Atlanta-PBS and elsewhere. He can be reached at: gary_corseri@comcast.net. [Read other articles by Gary.](#)

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