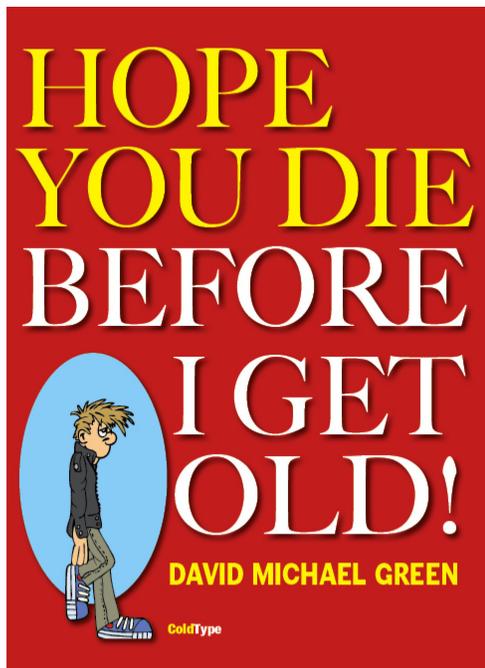


HOPE
YOU DIE
BEFORE
I GET
OLD!



DAVID MICHAEL GREEN

ColdType



THE AUTHOR

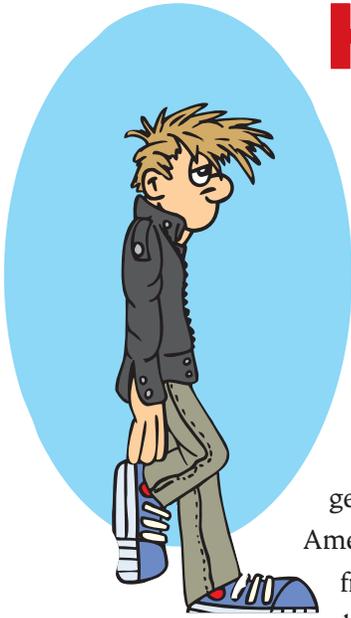
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More of his work can be found at his website, www.regressiveantidote.net.

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HOPE YOU DIE BEFORE I GET OLD

DAVID MICHAEL GREEN

As a Baby Boomer, I'm sure not encouraging generational warfare in America. I have everything to lose from such a battle. On the other hand, though, as a political

analyst, I can hardly believe we're not seeing it.

Never has it been so manifestly logical. Never would it be so thoroughly deserved. And yet, never has it been so astonishingly absent from the playing field of American politics.

I grew up in a period of generational conflict. "Never trust anyone over thirty", "Hope I die before I get old", etc. But I have to say that my generation got a way better deal from our parents than we're leaving for our kids.

Sure, our parents bequeathed us Vietnam and Nixon. But I think those politics were a matter more of naivete, really, rather than malice or greed. I remember how my own parents reacted to the war and to Watergate. Having struggled collectively through the Depression, and having fought the good fight of World War II, I think they were wholly unprepared for the levels of deceit and callous indif-

ference to harm they came inescapably to find that their government was capable of. This was an existential challenge of the kind we jaded Boomers can probably never appreciate. They were true believers, and they were rattled to the core when Toto pulled back the curtain. Their children, on the other hand, were raised to become cynics, for whom no such political crime can ever quite surprise us.

And it's funny, too (though certainly not hah-hah funny), to think of how our generation – as much as you can speak of such a thing without falling into stereotypes worthy only of some PBS pledge-break docudrama – how we mocked the materialism of our parents. At one level, we were right to do so. Big cars with tail-fins were not exactly means for enrichment of the soul. No one was ever gonna transcend the material world and get to nirvana by purchasing a TV set and watching the latest episode of *Ponderosa* (in living color!). But, on the other hand, we might have been a whole lot more charitable, too. Given where they came from, and what they'd been through, it was not so outrageous for them to seek a little prosperity and comfort. Moreover – on the other other hand – there's that whole nagging hy-

pocrisy thing. The truth is that the rocket-fueled materialism of their kids makes Mom and Dad's modest suburban house with the single TV in the living room seem awfully quaint by comparison. Today, if there isn't a satellite-fueled TV in every room of your McMansion (and, of course, your cars as well), with a DVD player and game box hooked up to each, Child Protective Services might well be dispatched to cart your kids away in order to protect them from neglect.

But even if the Greatest Generation wasn't so great when it came to some of the items higher up on Maslow's laundry list, their kids – the Boomers – could only dream of being as devoted parents as were their own. Indeed, if there's any one great crime for which the World War II generation may be most guilty, it is the raising up of the most narcissistic, self-centered, self-aggrandizing crop of kids ever. In China they call the analogous generation the Little Emperors. I guess we're a bit too self-reverential for even that little bit of comedic introspection. Just the same, though, not for nothing are we known as the Me Generation. To get a sense of our sense of ourselves, just look at the two presidents we've contributed to the pantheon: Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Of the latter nothing need be said that could meaningfully add anything to the eight years of experiencing this president's capacity for self-indulgence and his unparalleled sense of entitlement. As for Monsieur Clinton, he is said to have lamented, especially after 9/11, the fact that no major crisis occurred on his watch, so that he could join Lincoln and FDR and Washington among the greatest presidents of all time. Now, if I sat down for six weeks trying to think of the most self-centered sentiment I could conceive of in all the world, I doubt seriously I could top that one. Imagine wishing that thousands of people could die in order to enhance your repu-

tation for the history books. And this after you've already had the privilege of serving two terms in the most exclusive position in the world.

Gee, what a legacy we've left in presidential politics. But it only gets worse if we consider the more general picture. I cannot think of a single time in American history where one generation left their children such a stunningly large and complete a mess to clean up.

The fiscal part of it is astonishing, though only the most visible element. A wrecked economy that may sink below the depths of the Great Depression is just the latest contribution. But even before that, economists have been predicting that today's young people will be the first generation in American history to be less well off than their parents. That doesn't even account for the nation's crumbling infrastructure, which has been almost completely neglected for 30 years, so that we could party now and pay later. It also doesn't include bills encumbered as Baby Boomers begin to retire and demand their promised Social Security and Medicare. These would be almost impossible to meet by virtue of demographic and rising healthcare factors alone. But we might have had a chance at doing so had we set aside the revenues coming in all these last decades while Boomers were working, for use at the time when the payers would become the payees, en masse. But, of course, that would have meant raising taxes or spending less – and we can't have that! – since we've been using that money instead to pay for general budget expenses.

Or, should I say, to not pay for general budget expenses? Could you imagine parents so reckless that they would party themselves into a drunken stupor by stealing the funds from their children? I'm not talking about burning through the inheritance, which, after all, is the parents' money to do what they want with. No, I'm talking about spending

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the money the kids have saved themselves for their own college education, or for a down-payment on a house. Outrageous, eh? Well, guess what? That's exactly what the Baby Boomers did. Because they wanted all the government services they got, plus the tax cuts that put a little extra jingle in their pockets, plus the luxury of being so stupid and ill-informed that they didn't have to grapple with the questions of where that tax 'cut' money was really going, or how utterly bogus were the administration's claims about its policies, especially concerning the hugely expensive Iraq war. Put it all together and it equates to living well beyond your means. And when you do that, there are only so many ways to deal with the difference in what you're spending versus what you're bringing in. Cue the kids here.

The math is astonishing. The current amount of the national debt is a staggering 10.667 trillion dollars, and climbing fast (indeed, it has already risen substantially since I typed that number). Let's leave aside for the moment that it is rising every year with each annual deficit – which some people now think could be a dramatically record-breaking trillion dollars next year – added to the pile. And let's also leave aside the fact that each of those dollars are borrowed, and are thus accruing additional liability every day in the form of interest. If we just take the current debt, and divide it by the number of payroll workers in America (about 150 million), that means each worker's share of the existing debt is \$71,113. Now, just for the sake of argument, let's say a worker has a job pulling down fifteen bucks per hour in pay. At that rate, they would have to work 4,741 hours to do nothing but pay off the amount that has been borrowed in their names, without their assent, and just to cover only what has been loaned so far to date – not counting new additions to the pile each day, and not counting accruing interest. At forty hours

a week, that's 2.37 years of someone's life. In fact, that's 2.37 years of 150 million people's lives. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine going to someone and saying "I'm going to force you to work over two years of your life in some job you probably don't like, so that I don't have to"? Because that's exactly what this represents: Baby Boomers refusing to live within their means and desperately turning to their own children to facilitate the parents' irresponsibility. Parents stealing more than two years of their children's lives, to add two years of play time to their own. Unreal.

But, of course, economics are only the beginning of the story, and not even the worst of it. Imagine a meteor was headed to Earth, and there was a way to avoid the destruction of the planet, with little pain or sacrifice involved in doing so. Imagine if instead you did nothing and let the planet be destroyed. That's what the global warming crisis and our reaction to it looks like. The only good news here for our generation – and especially for our generation of Americans – is that our maximal stupidity will probably guarantee that there are no historians left around in the future to call us out as the single generation throughout the entire history and pre-history of the species that caused infinitely more damage to ourselves and our host planet than all the others combined. The one that ended the game. What an honor, eh? And haven't we just been wonderful to our kids in this regard? Because we couldn't be bothered to switch to electric cars instead of gasoline, or insulate our houses, we are taking the Earth we were fortunate enough to inherit as our home and giving them Mercury instead.

That's something to be proud of, ain't it? Then there's also foreign policy to consider. America before Bush was no great shakes when it came to our relations with the rest of the world, although we

somehow managed to engender a fair amount of good feelings, despite ourselves. We certainly did some good things out there in the world, but we also supported every two-bit dictator who would play ball with our corporate interests, and opposed every real democratic government that would not. Marcos, the Shah, Pinochet, Diem, apartheid South Africa, Saddam – the list is endless. But never, despite all that, has this country been as reviled in the world as it is now, nor ever more deservedly so. In addition to undermining the Anti-Ballistic Missile, Kyoto, International Criminal Court and Geneva Convention treaties, the United States now stands four-square for the principles of unjustified military aggression, invasion of sovereign states, and torture. True, most of us never wanted any of that. But then most of us never did a damn thing about it, either.

As a result, this is just one more way in which we've handed our children a raw deal. In this case, we've made them hated in much of the world, just for being Americans. Not only did we spend their time and money, we've spent their good will for them too. And – according to our own intelligence agencies – we've created a farm system abroad which has been busy generating droves of anti-American terrorists. It is very possible, therefore, that our children will die tomorrow in terrorist attacks that were directly precipitated by our laziness today in curbing the gross excesses of a disastrous administration. You'd almost think we lived in a Stalinesque dictatorship of the most repressive sort, given our disinterest in using the tools readily available to us to replace or even stymie a government gone insane. Who would think, looking at the mass violent crime called Iraq committed in our name, and using our tax dollars – a crime that we stood by and watched happen – that we actually had the power to do something about this? Who would think that we live in country

where a president can be impeached for as little as lying about getting a blow job? And yet we did nothing. Shame on us. My god, shame on us.

We could go on and on here. How broken is our educational system? How obscenely twisted is that corporate business enterprise masquerading as our healthcare system, a beast only incidentally concerned with keeping our country well? How messed up is American foreign policy in the Middle East, not even counting Iraq or Iran? How bankrupt are our societal values when everyone knows who Britney and Brad are, but probably not even one in ten could name the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court? How jive is our commitment to equality of opportunity (let alone actual equality), when we fund our schools through property taxes, with absolutely predictable results? How dishonest can one society be, when it deploys more mercenaries than soldiers, woefully abuses the National Guard and the Reserves, hides the bodies coming home in caskets, avoids a draft, cuts taxes and deficit spends, all to prevent citizens from having to think about a war that would instantly be massively unpopular in the absence of such ruses? How breathtakingly paranoid are we, and how devoid of the most basic skills of diplomacy, that we spend more money on 'defense' than every other country in the world – about 195 of them – combined? How fundamentally deluded at the wholesale level are we that it would be effectively impossible for an atheist to be elected president? How shamefully lazy are we that – even in 2008 – a third of us still didn't bother to vote, and the rest of us tolerate an electoral system frequently designed to suppress turnout?

And so on, and so on. As I said, we could go on and on here.

To me, it's shocking that one generation could be so blatantly irresponsible as to leave such a broken

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system to its children. It's one thing to exploit other people, and – as much as I loathe racism or sexism or colonialism – it's a little easier for me as a social scientist to wrap my head around the idea of abusing others whom we first take care to differentiate, objectify and demonize on the basis of some arbitrary primordialist factor. But our own kids? Wow. And, actually, it's far worse than that. Using the term 'irresponsible' here to describe what has happened is far, far too generous. This is not a case of negligence. This was a knowing theft, and our own children were the victims. While they slept, late at night, we crept into their rooms, stole the piggy bank, smashed it to pieces, then used the proceeds to buy some leisure time for sipping beer and watching "American Idol", or some bullets to destroy the lives of an innocent Iraqi family somewhere. Yep. No doubt about it. It's the feel-good story of the century, my friends.

What is most astonishing about the whole thing is that I detect almost nothing in the way of anger from the victims. When I try to talk to my students about how my generation is ripping off their generation, somehow I'm always the angriest guy in the classroom, by far. Probably I should just keep my mouth shut, eh? I mean, I've paid into Social Security since I was sixteen years old, and I'd like it to be there when I'm an old geezer, unable any longer to fool some hapless university into paying me to scandalize yet another generation with my Maoist, anticlerical, sexually deviant, radical environmentalist revolutionary dogma. I'm okay with their generosity, but, to be totally truthful, I wouldn't exactly blame the next generations for saying "Screw you, pal. You guys had your party already, and we're not paying for it twice. Fund your own freakin' retirement." God knows we have that coming.

Whether we get it or not is another question. Societies – especially those as diverse as the United

States – can develop political cleavages along all sorts of different lines. In Canada, it's linguistic. In Northern Ireland, it's religious. In Mexico, it's ethnic. In Italy, it's geographic. There is no reason that, in America, it couldn't be generational, just as it once was not so long ago.

No reason, that is, except that nobody seems to be mobilizing along those lines. I do see something of a youth consciousness reawakening, especially with the figure of Barack Obama on the horizon, seemingly having the same effect on young people that John Kennedy once did. But, to the extent that it exists – which isn't much – it seems very benign in its content. Perhaps the young folk of today are all post-ideological, like Obama, sick of the divisiveness and the consternation and the battles that animated their parents and grandparents for so long (if only they knew what was purchased for them with the blood, sweat and tears of those battles). Whatever the reason, though, it's as hard for me to envision them shouting out "Never trust anyone over thirty" as it is for me to envision them just shouting out at all. That doesn't seem to be a part of their makeup.

But the ingredients are there, I'd say, for a generational schism in American politics, if somebody wants to come along to pick up that particular ball and run with it. Not only is there plenty of legitimate cause for anger, there is also a yawning ideological divide opening up. Much as young folks may not necessarily want to construe themselves in ideological terms, they seem nevertheless to be considerably to the left of their elders. A look at the demographic data following the election shows rather emphatically that age was one of the best predictors of the vote. The younger you were, the more likely you were to vote Obama. Moreover, Democratic Party registrations among the youngest voters in America absolutely overwhelm those for Republicans. They may not be

thinking in left-right terms, per se, but it is clear that they are rejecting the Republican Party. And not just because they don't like the sound of the name, either, or because McCain came off like the dinosaur he is. Especially on social issues – the red meat and absolute sine qua non of the GOP base – this generation is saying no thanks to prejudice, hatred, religious control and sexual regulation across the board. But if one were to eliminate those items from today's Republican Party, there'd be almost nothing left remaining in the convention hall, apart from a few gun lobbyists and the occasional, stray, left-over neocon cheerleading for another war somewhere (“Freakin’ Burkina Faso, I tell you, they’re a huge threat to our national security!”).

Don't get me wrong – I'm not predicting generational warfare in America. And, trust me when I say that I hope it doesn't happen. Apart from the fact that this country needs another schism like it needs another Bush for president, I personally have everything to lose and nothing to gain if younger Americans start telling older Americans that it's long past time the Me Generation started thinking in terms of being the We Generation, and learned to share a bit.

If that happens, I hope they are at least more gracious and sympathetic to us than we ever were to them. But I'll certainly understand it if they're not.

Because, I'll tell you what. If I was a twenty-something right now, I'd be pissed.

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