A Modest Generation

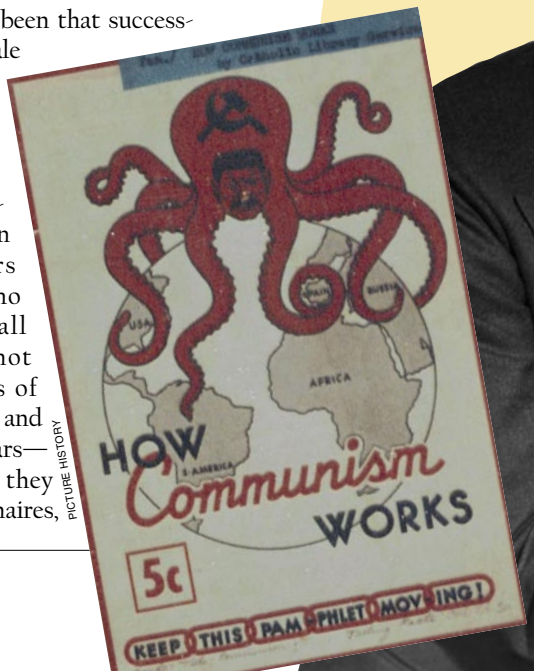
Fiftieth-reunion reflections on the change from Calvinist values to the entertainment-age culture

by DAVID HALBERSTAM

So WHAT do we call ourselves? As labels for a generation go, The Silent Generation always struck me as singularly stupid; I don't think we were any more silent or noisy than most generations. Our formative years were neither easy nor affluent ones: if our median class birthday is September 1, 1933, then we were born almost four years into the Depression, were 8 years old when the United States entered World War II, 12 years old when the war ended and when, equally important, an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, 13 in 1946 when Churchill gave his Iron Curtain speech, and almost 15 when the Berlin blockade began. Welcome to the real world.

We are children therefore of the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, and the atomic age. That, it strikes me, ought to make us a serious, somber, and reasonably skeptical generation and I suspect we are. We were somewhat more modest about our career possibilities than those who came after us, and with good reason; no one we knew when we were young had ever been that successful on a large scale in Wall Street. No one, when we were young, talked about disposable income, and even those members of our class who went off to Wall Street did not think in terms of making millions and millions of dollars—if they thought they might be millionaires, and I suspect few of them did, it was over the course of a long career, not in just one year or two.

I ponder who we are a lot, and I think I've finally come up with it. We were weaned on slow dancing—the foxtrot (Does anyone call it the foxtrot any more?)—instead of, mercifully, the waltz. One of the great fault lines in American culture finds us generally, I suspect, on the conservative side of a great musical divide. Culturally we preceded the rock generation, albeit not by much, and we are not as a group—for I have studied this carefully at numerous large parties, weddings, and other celebrations where there is a band—eager to venture out on the dance floor when the band plays rock loudly (and often badly, I might add). Our wives, especially if they are a decade younger, may be eager to go forth and do battle, but we hold back. Instead we venture out only at geezer time, when the music changes and when the band plays the slower classics, the ones that our parents favored, the wonderful music of Gershwin and Kern and Porter and others from the Great American Songbook. The other day at a wedding,



PICTURE HISTORY

Jack Benny and Fred Allen

ALL IMAGES FROM CORBIS, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

watching this phenomenon once again, I was finally struck with the truth—we are the Frank Sinatra Generation. That is our real comfort level, that in the mid Fifties Sinatra took the music we know best and sang it better than any American singer before or since.

We were raised on radio, not television. Most of us were probably well into our twenties before we bought our first television sets. This does not mean merely that our minds are filled, as mine is, with altogether too much garbage-pail trivia from radio days—that is, which program preceded Jack Benny on Sunday night (answer, *The Great Gildersleeve*), that Benny's announcer was Don Wilson and that Rochester was played by Eddie Anderson, that Benny was perennially 39 years old, and that the program was sponsored by Jello, which was J-E-L-L-O, spelled out for you; that Jack Armstrong, the ever-so-enviable all-American boy (enviable because I was so non-all-American as a boy), went to Hudson High, where his best friend was Billy—Billy Fairfield, I think—and the school song asked us to "Wave the flag for Hudson High, boys / Show them how we stand..."; I even recall the words to the Chiquita Banana song ("Bananas like the climate of the very, very tropical equator / So you should never put bananas...in the refrigerator, oh no no no").

Because of that radio childhood, we have, I suspect, different, slightly stodgier values than those younger than we are. Television, after all, speeds everything up, because television loves movement and action and so it accelerates, for its own needs, the pace of life: things change more quickly, it brings us more fads, and as a nation our values change accordingly. Radio was the instrument that brought us baseball, with its almost languorous rhythms in our childhood; television, with its love of fast action, brought us pro football in our late twenties, a sport which had de facto minor-league status when we were younger. Television creates an infinitely more volatile society, one premised on action, which in turn begets change, often as an end in itself.

We are part of an era where Americans tended to live in one place and have one job with one firm for most of their lives. I think that's important because in some ways our values evolved from that, and are involuntarily more traditional. We have, for a variety of reasons, what I would call slower values, less given to fad and to change. We are stodgier, more cautious; in our dress codes I suspect we still prefer the tweed jackets, blazers, and grey flannel pants that we wore when we were young; we are more likely than generations that have succeeded us to be—in dress, and in thought process, and in cultural attitude—what we were when we were younger. That does not make us better or nobler than those who followed us, but perhaps we are more careful and more wary of change, possibly more aware of the consequences of events. We did, after all, grow up with the dire consequences of other people's miscalculations.

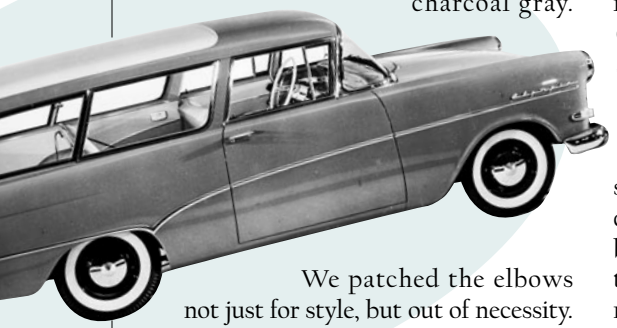
The word "dysfunctional" was not used when we were young, and we did not talk about the burdens of dysfunctional homes. Because of World War II, our family was uprooted when my father went back in the service, and we followed him all over the country before he was shipped overseas; by the time I entered the eighth grade, I was in my sixth different school, but change like that seemed perfectly normal, and the idea of any self-pity would have seemed self-indulgent.

We grew up before the age of the Pill, in what was a significantly more arid time sexually—the Pill would enter the culture some 10 years after we graduated from college—and the dramatic change wrought in our society by the changes in contraception and the sexual revolution took place a little late for many of us. We were probably the last of the American generations where young, college-educated people did not readily live together before marriage; in that sense we were unlike young people today who have the freedom to experiment with each other now. Many in our generation got married, among other reasons, in order to have a healthy sex life. Looking back, I am aware that all of this was harder on the young women of our era than on the men: they went off to college with us, studied harder, got better marks than we did, and—that having been accomplished—got married and had kids and drove the station wagons in the suburbs, and some 15 years later were challenged by the women's movement, and told that they should have it both ways.

The America that formed us was very different, much less affluent, and in many ways much narrower than that of today. Most of us grew up in homes without air conditioning or, for that matter, central heating. Dishwashers and laundry machines would have to come later. I still call the refrigerator the ice box. In our rural home in Winsted, Connecticut (my uncle's house, where we lived for much of the war), I had to shovel coal into the furnace on cold winter mornings. It is not a story that greatly interests my daughter,

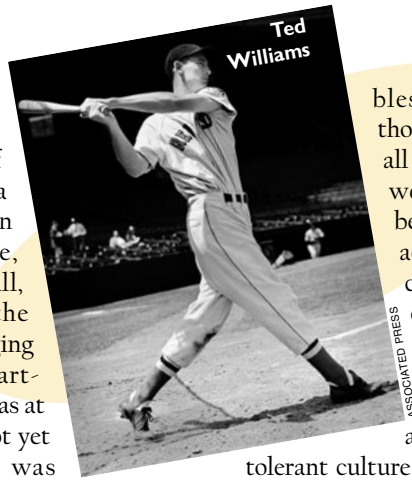
she of the central heating/central cooling generation. The cars we bought when we were young, even after we had graduated from college, tended to be wrecks, often driven on terrible tires—on the last day of my long trip from Cambridge to Mississippi for my first job, in July 1955, I was in my 10-year-old Chevy and on that one inglorious final day before I started my career, I blew two tires and threw a time gear on the road from Jackson, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. At the time I had never been on an airplane, and I made my first trip across the ocean seven years later, paid for by the *New York Times* when it sent me to the Congo.

The Harvard Square we knew was not lined, street after street, with sophisticated stores, and we did not spend money on clothes or entertainment or restaurants very lightly. The great buy at J. August were the Hathaway shirts, advertised by the man with the eye patch, and they cost three for $10. Most of us had two tweed jackets, and perhaps one suit, charcoal gray.



We patched the elbows not just for style, but out of necessity. Many of us were, I suspect, part of the first wave of the meritocracy, and became, more than those in generations which had gone before us, young men defined by what we did. Our jobs and our positions in the society were hard won. They were almost always a notch or two above the level achieved by those who had gone before us in our families; as such, they were often as much triumphs for our parents as they were for us. We still, I suspect, work better than we play.

It is hard to imagine a country changing so dramatically in a person's lifetime as America changed in ours. We began life in what was in all ways, in terms of the surface life (that is, who was visible and who had power and influence), a white country of 140 million people. Today's America, with 295 million people, is an immensely diverse, infinitely more complex country of which the Harvard of today—compared to the very traditional Harvard of our day—is but a small reflection. When we entered college, there were, as I recall, two computers in the country, both belonging to the Defense Department, and the Dow was at 339.7. America was not yet a great power. It was thinking about being a great power, and the Harvard government department was filled with the young, would-be architects of that greatness, with names like Bundy, Kissinger, Schlesinger (James), and Brzezinski. There was still a presumption, when we were in college, of British preeminence—that whatever it was, academe, military, or diplomatic, the Brits did it better than we did.

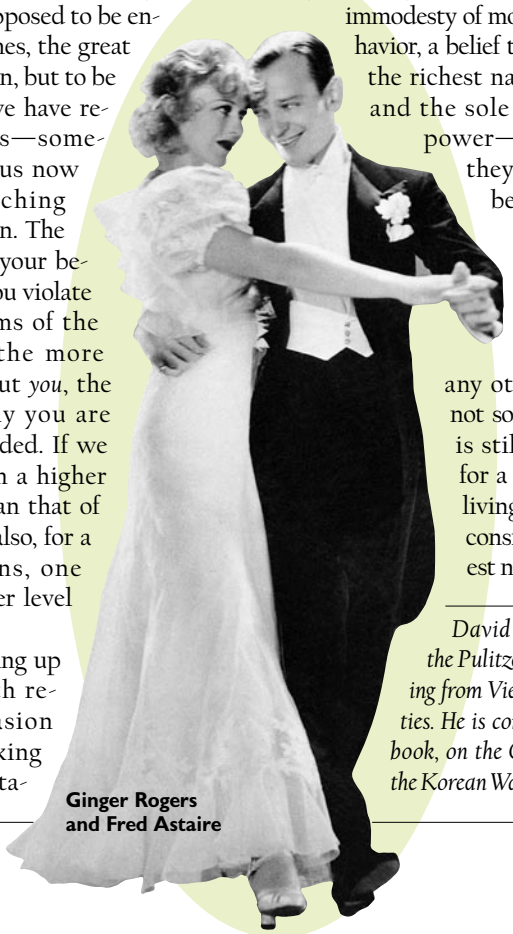


ASSOCIATED PRESS

The change in our country in those 50 years, so much of it driven by technology, is startling. We have gone from a semi-Calvinist society, or at least a society that still paid homage to Calvinist values, to a modern, new-entertainment-age culture where we all have television sets which are close to being de facto movie screens in our homes, often with hundreds of channels. It is a society where, because we are supposed to be entertained at all times, the great new sin is not to sin, but to be boring. As such we have reversed our values—something quite obvious now to anyone watching sports on television. The more provocative your behavior, the more you violate the existing norms of the sports society, the more everything is about *you*, the more handsomely you are likely to be rewarded. If we are a society with a higher level of energy than that of our youth we are also, for a variety of reasons, one with a much lower level of basic civility.

In the end, coming up on the big fiftieth reunion—an occasion many of us, checking out the actuarial tables of our parents, never thought we'd reach—I think, all in all, we did okay. I think we got the best of it, the best of the steadiness and accountability of the preceding era with its now-often-scorned values, a great chance to live better lives, and yet the ability to enjoy the generally more open and more tolerant culture that followed the one in which we started out. Our work ethic was, I think, admirable. We ended up living through a lot—especially the Cold War, a struggle that seemed, when we were young, likely to last our lifetimes, until one day the communist world imploded of its own weight.

In all of this we survived and endured. We made our accommodations, sometimes enthusiastically and sometimes grudgingly, with the explosive rate of change around us: some of us are good on the Internet and cell phones, and some of us, like myself—it infuriates my family—are not. Some of our expectations were, I suspect, significantly more modest than those of generations that came after us, young people born into an era of infinitely greater affluence and privilege. That is just fine with me, for I am uneasy these days with what strikes me as the immodesty of modern American behavior, a belief that because we are the richest nation in the world, and the sole surviving superpower—a hyperpower as they say—that we are better at everything than anyone else, and know more on any given subject than anyone else from any other country. I am not so sure. I think there is still much to be said for a modest generation living in a strong, wise, considerably more modest nation. ∎



Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire

David Halberstam '55 won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from Vietnam in the early sixties. He is completing his twentieth book, on the Chinese entrance into the Korean War.

ALL IMAGES FROM CORBIS, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED