

Editor’s note: *What follows is the original response by Andy Dawkins to a Jan. 7, 2018, commentary in the Star Tribune by Stephen B. Young titled “Our chaotic culture: Blame it on ’68.” Dawkins represented a Midway St. Paul district in the Minnesota House, won DFL endorsement for mayor and headed the housing enforcement unit for the city of St. Paul. In this response, Dawkins took issue with Young’s characterization. But he and Young later sat down for a discussion and together wrote a commentary seeking common ground — “Blame it on ’68, revisited” — published June 10, 2018.*

TODAY’S TEENAGERS IN THE STREETS - A RESILIENT DEMOCRACY

Introduction

Much has recently been written about 1968 and what a watershed year it was for politics and democracy in the United States: Most thoroughly, Lawrence O’Donnell’s book *Playing with Fire: The 1968 Election and the Transformation of American Politics*; more recently, Stephen Young’s *Blame it on ’68* opinion piece in the Sunday, January 7, 2018 StarTribune. Just about everybody these days agrees our country and our democracy are *not* better off than we were fifty years ago.

Mr. Young argues Baby-Boomers are to blame. Talking with Gen Xers and Millennials, there’s a jealousy and resentment about Boomers – Boomers had it all (music, love and prosperity) and blew it. *Today’s high school kids in the streets to end gun violence got me thinking that Mr. Young’s piece missed the mark by pinning blame for our country’s demise on the anti-war protesters in the streets in 1968.* Mr. Young posits that politics follows culture, and that a 1968 version of “fake news” headlined the war protests, the youthful “Clean for Gene” crowd, glorifying the counter-culture; and somehow missed the fact that the Tet Offensive launched by the North Vietnamese in January, 1968, ended as a massive defeat for the communists.

What Mr. Young missed was that it was democracy in action that caused the U.S. pull-out from Viet Nam. Whether right or wrong to oppose the war, what matters is believing in democracy, *just like the teenagers in the streets today do.* It is the essence of democracy that things can be self-correcting. Democracy, by definition, includes the people, and people-in-the-streets too.

Are Baby Boomers to be blamed for the decline of democracy over the past fifty years? A straight-forward look at the facts shows the decline had much more to do with “dirty tricks,” outright government lying, “rat-fucking” (even treason), trickle-down economics, a shrinking middle class, divide and conquer politics (polarization) – than to the “culture of entitlement” that Mr. Young assigns to Boomers. In 1968 the country went from surely electing Robert Kennedy, preaching inclusivity and hope,* to Richard Nixon, preaching fear, law and order – a divide and conquer politics.

*Bobby’s last words before being shot were “What I think – what I think is quite clear is that we can work together in the last analyses and that what has been going on in the United States over the period of the last three years, the division, the violence, the disenchantment with our society, the division whether it’s between black and white, between the poor and the more affluent or

between age groups over the war in Vietnam, that we can start to work together. We are a great country.” He had support in the ghettos, in the white working class, and amongst college students. The protesters in the street were willing to give Democrats one last chance.

A Culture in Decay?

The 1960s opened with JFK idealism and patriotism: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” The New Frontier. The Peace Corps. Throughout the ‘60s the civil rights movement forged a new pathway for democracy, the right to vote for Blacks too – notably not led by the politicians. Some Boomers joined in; some even lost their lives (Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner). The civil rights struggle was the foundation for the anti-war movement. Politically, the nation became more and more aware of a government lying to us: the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the Pentagon Papers. Culturally, Dylan, the Beatles, long hair, Woodstock, Women’s Lib, Draft Resistance, and Yippies running a pig for President, fed into the oppositional nature of adolescence – “Question Authority.” There was a fun part to being part of The Movement for a New America: The old Emma Goldman adage: “I won’t join your revolution unless I can dance too.” The poster: “Girls say Yes to Boys who say No.”

But Mr. Young makes too much of this “fun part” spelling the descent of our country into a cultural decay, the rejection of personal responsibility, no more duty to family and country. It wasn’t so much fun for those who went off to Viet Nam, and for those lucky to be in college, the emergence of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (the VVAW) as part of The Movement affirmed what was partly fun, was also deadly serious – veteran (later U.S. Senator) John Kerry’s testimony before Congress in 1971 describing the atrocities and questioning why we were there. And when the authorities started shooting at college students – Kent State, four dead in Ohio – it literally became deadly serious. *Those protesting in the streets held American values - American idealism - for democracy and equality closer to heart than the country’s leaders did, including those in the corporate board rooms, who alarmed at growing numbers started plotting to put democracy on a shorter leash.*

It wasn’t so much a refusal to conform as a vision of a better world. As Gene McCarthy put it: “Young people brought the country back into the system; rather than my campaign brought young people into the system.”

What Went Wrong?

One of the most admired Americans in the early 1970s was Ralph Nader, especially on college campuses – many became “Nader’s Raiders.” Today’s MPIRG (Minnesota Public Interest Research Group) has a direct lineage to Mr. Nader. Boomers were also pro-environment (first Earth Day was in 1970), and believed in holding corporations responsible for putting people (safety) before profits. Using democratic principles, as well as the court system, Boomers were succeeding so much so the business community became alarmed.

On August 23, 1971, a lesser known American, Lewis Powell, then a high-powered corporate lawyer in Washington D.C., wrote a letter to the National Chamber of Commerce. Two months later President Nixon appointed Powell to the U.S. Supreme Court. In that letter Mr. Powell cried out that the American enterprise system was under attack – not from socialists and

extremists – but from ordinary Americans, the pulpit, the media and college campuses, singling out Ralph Nader as “the single most effective antagonist of American business.” He warned that Nader was winning over the hearts and minds of the country’s future leaders. “The time has come for the wisdom, ingenuity, and resources of American business to be marshalled against those who would destroy it,” he wrote, in what came to be known as the corporate blueprint to dominate American democracy.

At that time the National Chamber of Commerce lobbied Congress out of a bungalow on K Street with minimal staff, or as Mr. Powell put it: “In terms of political influence with respect to legislative and government action, the American business executive is the forgotten man.” Today, of course, the Chamber is in a shining, collunaded, monumental-looking building, and has staff in all fifty states – and, after Mr. Powell became Justice Powell, the number of corporate rights cases the Supreme Court granted certiorari to rose from 5% to 25%. Powell also suggested the need for a propaganda campaign. The right wing “think tanks” of today, such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and others, have a direct link to this Powell letter.

Together, these think tanks and the Chamber of Commerce, came up with a multi-strategy approach to reign-in what they saw as a rising anti-corporate democracy, including divide and conquer politics on social issues as well as race issues. One astonishingly successful strategy that has redounded poorly was to switch the majority of the tax burden from the upper class to the middle class (hoping to lead to a middle class that wants less government) – the advent of “trickle-down economics” – convincing a majority of voters that we all do better when the rich do better. In 1960 Bob Hope paid 91% of his second million in taxes. In the early ‘70s the highest marginal rate was still 72%. The highest rate on today’s billionaires is 39.6%, before loopholes. Today’s extreme skewing of income inequity can be traced to the Powell letter.

Of course, there are many other ways the corporate world has ascended to such a powerful place in American democracy – the infusion of money into politics (the *Citizens United* case), “rat-fucking” in drawing election maps (read *Ratf**ked – The True Story Behind The Secret Plan To Steal America’s Democracy* by David Daley, putting up barriers to the political market place, and other ways of keeping democracy on a short leash. As one pundit put it, “If elections really made a difference, they’d be declared illegal.”

A Justifiable Cynicism about Politics

While corporate America was making plans to dominate democracy, the Watergate scandal unfolded, and a cynicism about politics became predominant amongst many: “Nothing will ever change. The system is rigged. Why vote?” There was, of course, reason for despair, including the police rioting in Chicago at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, and a Humphrey endorsement that year despite McCarthy winning the primaries (including Pennsylvania 428,000 to 72,000, yet the Pennsylvania delegates voted 104 to 26 for Hubert.)

Following the 1968 election of Nixon, it came to light that then candidate Nixon secretly undermined the Paris peace talks just so President Johnson and the Democrats couldn’t take credit for ending the war. 21,195 American soldiers died in Viet Nam after Nixon became President. The final peace agreement negotiated by Nixon in 1973 was no more than what LBJ

had in hand in October, 1968. 21,195 lives lost due to treasonous acts. In the '50s and '60s it was common to want to grow up to be President. Today hardly any kid does – politics has gotten such a bad name.

So, in a sense, the Gen Xers and Millennials, are right – Boomers had it all and blew it, giving up on politics – just walked away, got jobs, started families – found peace in close communities with some control over individual destiny. Some went the Jimmy Buffet route: What if you didn't work that hard? What if your ambition was not for success or money, but for life's little pleasures, the vacations, cocktail hours and maybe a joint. And yes, many went to work for corporate America. But most Boomers still held to basic American values – it's not Boomers who damaged democracy, who shattered the American dream of a shared prosperity. If today's income was dispersed like it was in 1973 (before our manufacturing sector was hallowed out), every middle class family would have a whopping \$16,500 more in income per year* – enough to move out of your parents' house and buy your own place, or pay-off those crazy-high student loans, or start a retirement account.

*Spencer P. Morrison, National Economics Editorial, February 7, 2017; the Economic Policy Institute calculates median household income would have risen \$15,700 between 1979 and 2013 had there been no increase in inequality post-1979.

A Path Forward

The teenagers in the streets today have provided a renewed hope. I hope Steve Young will agree that the path forward is a resurgence of democracy across the land. If our politicians in office do the expedient thing to get reelected, rather than what's the right thing to do, then replace them. When Boomers were marching in the streets in the '60s it was not about jobs and wages, it was about a photo of a little Vietnamese girl running down the street burning from napalm. If today's teenagers can pivot from seventeen dead in Parkland, Florida, to the basic democratic principle of fair elections, and start voting when they become voting age,* Boomers, Gen Xers and Millennials will pile on, knowing there is a way to reduce the number of school shootings (239 since Sandy Hook in 2012), understanding our *current* democracy is bought and paid for. And maybe, just maybe, we will see an un-skewing of our economy in favor of the 1%. Maybe, just maybe, those hard-working blue-collar Americans who were the backbone of our economy in yesteryear, but have come to see themselves as outsiders now, will see the fallacy of divide and conquer politics.

Every generation has to find its own way of being heard, being fighters for social change. Having a democracy of, by and for the people is a start. Resiliency.

*It might be helpful to point out that Donald Trump was elected by less than 1/6th of the voting age population. Two-thirds of America didn't vote. The other one-third split fifty-fifty for Trump and Hillary. The Trump election, exemplifying how bad it's gotten, may serve to bring us all back together.