

The Generational Trifecta: Yet One More Reason America is in Turmoil! (Op-ed)



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America is in the midst of change, no doubt about it! Pundits have given many reasons for the tossing and turning of the American middle class, a new kind of “sleeping giant.” The down economy, the immigration influx, globalization versus nationalization – all have been addressed, but no one has taken a good, hard look at the turbulent times we are living in through a generational lens. At least, not until now.

America is in the middle of *three* generational transitions, which affects all of America’s six living generations. Whatever arena you’re in, knowing what’s happening in each generation will help you make the right decisions, understand the history that’s taking place, and create new strategies to meet challenges. The center piece of the puzzle we find ourselves in, socially, business-wise, politically, is change, change, and more change.

So, let’s start. America gave birth to the *Baby Boom Generation* almost nine months to the day after World War II ended and our soldiers returned. Historian [Landon Jones](#) wrote the ultimate birth announcement: “...the cry of the baby was heard across the land.” Born from 1943 to 1960, according to historians [Neil Howe](#) and [William Strauss](#), this generation of

79,000 million was the largest generation born in the United States up until that time. Boomers demanded the attention of the media, the marketplace, and most everyone else due to their sheer numbers alone. Their generational values, forged by the history of their formative years, included **idealism**, **focus on self**, and **love of values**, particularly their own. Their wants, their needs, and their desires have guided America for more than seven decades. Like them or not, we're used to them and their ways.

Most of what's been happening in America since the end of World War II has been based on Baby Boomer values. These values have been so pervasive, for so long, that many of us considered their value system the norm. Now, we are in shock. Younger generations are threatening these values, not only with a transition of power, but more ... a fresh change of course. Everything we know, everything we're used to, everything we do in Boomer style won't work. The clash of generations affects you at home, in the school system, in the workplace, in the marketplace, in the voting booth, with the environment, in health care and international affairs.



So, what's happened, from a generational point of view? A trifecta of powerful generations – Gen X (1961 to 1981), Millennials (1982 to 2000), and Gen Z (2001 to ????) – have burst out of the starting gate. That's what

happened.

For example, *Generation X* is a small generation and often

overlooked. These are the latchkey children of divorce who learned early they had to fend for themselves. Too many boomers in the workforce blocked them out of the job market and impeded the natural progression of job advancement. So, many Xers became entrepreneurs. Few support systems existed for broken-up and broken-down families. Even Auntie Ann didn't live down the street as part of the extended family because families were scattered all over the place. Mom and Dad were dating— but not each other—and getting on with their lives. Xers learned to raise themselves, to count on themselves and their friends, to survive by trusting their own instincts. Government programs were not there for them, and neither was religion. Remember *Time* magazine's famous cover on April 8, 1966, that proclaimed: "Is God Dead?" Facing a future of a weakened social security system and a weakened Medicare system because of boomer overload, Gen X knew the phrase "kicking the can down the road" meant they were going to have to be the baby boomer clean-up team. Their generational characteristics include being **practical**, **cynical**, and **giving and demanding the truth**, often in a harsh manner. They are often the catalyst that drives decisions made by older generations and they could be the voting dark horse in the 2016 presidential election that matters more than the favorite—the Millennials.

Millennials arrived in numbers even bigger than baby boomers. There are about 80 million of them, a quarter of the population of the United States. To put this in better perspective it means there are more of them than there are Brits, French people, or Spaniards. Media, the marketplace, and managers have a new darling who is demanding their attention. Boomers thought the millennials were younger versions of themselves. They were wrong. For example, Hillary Clinton saw the women of this generation as 60s feminists and got "Berned" for her mistake.

During their formative years, Millennials had all the support that Gen X did not: strong families, strong religion, strong

government programs. Support like this has given them **a desire for empowerment** and **a feeling of entitlement**. Students at Yale University demanded the “Major English Poets” course be redesigned to include fewer white males like Shakespeare and Chaucer. In a petition they stated their demands that more minority writers be included and concluded with this: “It is your responsibility as educators to listen to student voices. We have spoken. We are speaking. Pay attention.” Some other generational characteristics of **Millennials** include:

- **team spirit** due to being team-taught, team-graded, and receiving trophies just for *participating* in team sports;
- **lack of understanding of the concept of privacy** and glorification of telling all due to social media; and,
- **digital prowess**

Millennials understand the power they wield, want a place at the table, but sometimes forget they are still only one-fourth of the U.S. population.

Generation Z looks like another large generation. They are not a younger version of Baby Boomers, Generation X, or Millennials. Gen Zs are a highly protected generation. They are protected at home, due to kidnappings and Amber Alerts. They are protected at school due to Columbine-type incidences. They are protected in society due to the threat of terrorism. They will never know what it is like to walk through an airport without being inspected. Football, jungle gyms, and seesaws now are considered risky. Stacey Wehrman Feeley posted a photo of her three-year-old daughter, standing on a toilet seat, practicing how to hide if her pre-school goes on lockdown. The photo went viral. When children are protected to this extent, they tend to avoid taking risks and will become a generation of conformists as adults. A few of their generational characteristics include **trying to please**, **being conscientious**, and **a tendency to worry**. They will be good employees, but ones who need peaceful work environments. They

will give America its breathing spell.

America is in upheaval in great part due to generational transitions. We have become too strongly entrenched in the values, attitudes, and lifestyles of a single generation. It's time to reconsider the path we are on. After seven decades of Baby Boomers, the United States is trying to find its way. What did we do right? What did we do wrong? Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump are more than outsiders; they are symbols of people wanting change. Boomers would have liked "to teach the world to sing" forever however, their time for ruling is running short. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump will probably be the last candidates for president from that generation. Generation X, "a generation of survivors," Millennials, the "Can-Do Kids," and Gen Z, the "Just-Wanna-Fit-In Kids," are coming down the home stretch. Consider this your tip sheet. You'll need it. The track is muddy and you want to be holding the winning trifecta ticket!

***About the Author:** ANN A. FISHMAN was invited to Washington, D.C. to write on generational trends and was the recipient of four Research Fellowships awarded to her from the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging. She authored several white papers and was the principal developer for the National Mentor Corps, Federal legislation placing trained adults into the public school system as mentors. She also informed other countries how generational-targeted marketing can impact their businesses. She has taught generational marketing at New York University and is president of Generational Targeted Marketing, LLC, a specialized marketing firm providing insights into the preferences, trends, and buying habits of each of America's six generations. Her book, "Marketing to the Millennial Woman," was recently published.*