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# What Past Generations Can Teach Us About Our Future

By Mike Kubic  
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*If you've ever heard the term "generation gap," then you know about the widespread belief that the year in which you were born affects aspects of your personality. In this article, former Newsweek correspondent Mike Kubic (b. 1927) discusses the different generational populations that America recognizes, and then examines a potential pattern in how generations react to events in the world around them. As you read, take notes on Kubic's use of diction and structure, and how it influences your reading of these theories.*

- [1] There is nothing that fascinates people more than people: what makes them who they are, and why do they behave the way they do?

Why, for example, did young Americans after the First World War embarked on a hedonistic<sup>1</sup> era of merry-making and self-indulgence known as the "Roaring Twenties," while their counterparts after the Second World War were model citizens who built the American economy, made significant advances in science, and implemented seminal social and health care programs that are still the basis of today's prosperity and progress?



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How generations respond to historic events has preoccupied major historians such as Arnold J. Toynbee and Arthur Meier Schlesinger, as well as leading political scientists and economists. But some of the most pioneering and insightful (as well as controversial) research on the subject has been carried out by William Strauss and Neil Howe, two prolific American authors and historians who have developed the theory of recurring generational cycle in American history. Strauss and Howe (S&H) define a generation as people who were born over the span of roughly twenty years, or the average time it takes for an infant to grow up and become a parent. Each of these periods produces notable historic events and social trends, and in S&H's theory, these events and trends indelibly shape the people who had witnessed or were part of them.

As a result, these individuals share certain beliefs and behaviors, as well as a sense of common membership in that generation. Writing in the *Harvard Business Review* in August 2007, this is how the authors described their basic insight:

1. **Hedonistic** (*adjective*) engaged in the pursuit of pleasure

"[E]ach of us carries deeply-felt associations with various events in our lives. For Americans, Pearl Harbor,<sup>2</sup> the Kennedy<sup>3</sup> and King<sup>4</sup> assassinations, the Challenger explosion,<sup>5</sup> and 9/11<sup>6</sup> are burned into our consciousness; it is impossible to forget what we were doing at the time. As we grow older, we realize that the sum total of such events has in many ways made us who we are."

[5] There have been 19 of these American generations during the four centuries since the arrival of the Mayflower, and those still in living memory are usually identified as follows:

- **The Lost Generation** (of Americans born from 1883–1900) was the generation that came of age during World War I. It was a period of sustained economic prosperity, unprecedented industrial growth, accelerated consumer demand, and significant changes in lifestyle and culture. The period ended with the Wall Street crash in 1929.
- **The Greatest Generation or G.I. Generation** (1901–1924) grew up under the austere economic conditions of the Great Depression and went on to make major contributions to victory in World War II, both on the battlefield and by producing unprecedented profusion of weapons and military equipment for America's allies. This generation witnessed the start of the Cold War and the economic upturn that followed WWII.
- **The Silent Generation** (1925–1942) fought the 1950-1953 United Nations "police action" to prevent Communist takeover of South Korea. This generation included many political and civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X,<sup>7</sup> Bernie Sanders, Robert F. Kennedy, and Che Guevara,<sup>8</sup> as well as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones.
- **The Baby Boom Generation** (1943–1960) is described as "the wealthiest, most active, and most physically fit generation up to that time, and amongst the first to grow up genuinely expecting the world to improve with time." Now in their 50's-70's, Baby Boomers are believed to control over 80% of personal financial assets, do 50% of all travel, and account for more than half of all consumer spending in the United States.
- **Generation X** (1961–1981) has been described as "a generation whose worldview is based on change, on the need to combat corruption, dictatorships, abuse, and AIDS, a generation in search of human dignity and individual freedom, the need for stability, love, tolerance, and human rights for all." A study in 2007 found that this generation's men earned 12% less than their fathers had at that same age, thus reversing a historical trend.
- **Millennials or Generation Y** (1982–2004) have benefited the least from the economic recovery following the Great Recession of 2007-2009, and their average incomes have fallen twice as fast as those of the adult population. Despite higher college attendance rates than Generation X, many educated Millennials are stuck in low-paying jobs.

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2. A surprise attack on the United States naval base Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in 1941. This attack was a major factor that led to World War II
  3. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963
  4. Martin Luther King, Jr., famous civil rights leader, was assassinated in 1968
  5. On January 28, 1987, a NASA space orbiter named Challenger broke apart 73 seconds into its flight. This led to the death of all seven crew members and was widely covered by American media
  6. On September 11, 2001, an Islamic terrorist group launched a series of coordinated attacks on the United States.
  7. Minister and human rights activist
  8. Argentine revolutionary and guerrilla leader

- **The Homeland Generation or Generation Z** (2005–present) makes up 25% of the U.S. population and is exceptionally comfortable with modern technology and social media. However, a 2013 survey found that a high proportion of Gen Z was concerned about student debt and about being able to afford a college education.

## The Four Turnings of History

To learn how each generation responds to its formative experiences, S&H have studied the historic record all the way to the 14th Century. Based on their findings, they've concluded that societal mood and behavior have been repeatedly passing through a cycle of four stages. Called "Turnings," each of these stages has lasted about 20 years, and has been followed, always in the same order, by the next Turning with characteristics distinctly different from the preceding stage.

The four stages of history are described by S&H as follows:

1. The 1st Turning, which S&H call "High," is a period "when institutions are strong and individualism is weak. People work together, and the sense of community is strong, but spiritual depth and diversity are somewhat muted." The most recent "High" generation are the 77.3 million Baby Boomers born between 1946 and 1964.
2. The 2nd Turning, called the "Awakening," is marked by a mood of disenchantment and turning against what is regarded as a superficial and oppressive system. Young people during this period rebel against the government, institutions, and their parents, and fight for individual expression and freedom from control. The most recent example of "Awakening" is Generation X, whose members are now 36 to 55 year old.
- [10] 3. The 3rd Turning is an "Unraveling." According to S&H, the rebellion of the young during the "Awakening" has weakened the institutions, cultural identity and a sense of community. However, individualism is strong, and "Every man for himself" is the motto of the period. The most recent "Unraveling" of a generation is the Millennials, who are now 12-34 years old.
4. The 4th Turning, called "Crisis," is the period when people start to cooperate to confront the problems that had beset the "Unraveling." They tear down old, decaying institutions and start rebuilding them, which leads to the "High" of the next 1st Turning. The most recent "Crisis" was experienced by the G.I. or "Greatest" Generation, whose surviving members are now 74-91 years old.

## A Question of Reliability

In its basic outline, the S&H theory is relatively simple. According to the authors' research, from at least the 1400s onward – and with only a single exception, caused by the exceptional mayhem of the Civil War – the cycles of four Turnings have followed each other with such regularity that they could be used to predict the future.

"The patterns," S&H wrote in the *Harvard Business Review* article, "are strong enough to support a measure of predictability. Historical precedent makes it possible to foresee how the generations alive today will think and act in decades to come...."

Which is what the authors did in 1997, when they predicted that the next 4th Turning— the “Crisis” in which we are now— would begin “somewhere around 2005,” and “[i]n retrospect, the spark might seem as ominous as a financial crash, as ordinary as a national election, or as trivial as a Tea Party; (and it) will trigger a chain reaction of unyielding responses and further emergencies.”

- [15] So far, so prescient.<sup>9</sup> We'll know more about the reliability of S&H's theory if the cycle's next turns to a “High,” but in the meantime, the Turnings have firm believers as well as critics. Former Vice President Al Gore called S&H's *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* “the most stimulating book on American history he'd ever read.” He sent a copy to each member of Congress.

The theory has been influential also in the fields of generational studies, marketing, and business management literature. However, the Turnings have been criticized by some historians, political scientists and journalists as being overly-deterministic, and unsupported by rigorous evidence.

“However fun and informative,” one tongue-in-cheek commenter said, “the truth about generational generalizations is that they're generally unsatisfactory.”

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9. **Prescient** (*adjective*) having or showing knowledge of events before they take place