

The boomers had their day— Make way for the millennials

—by Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais

The scene at

American University last week was electric: thousands of young people filling an arena to hear Massachusetts Sen. Edward M. Kennedy endorse Barack Obama for president and praise the Illinois senator's ability to inspire and move a new generation of Americans.

It was the perfect setting for Obama, who has been focused on this new "millennial generation" from the start. Almost a year ago, in a speech to African American leaders in Selma, Ala., he underlined the differences between two different types of generations: the "Moses generation" that led the children of Israel out of slavery, and the "Joshua generation" that established the kingdom of Israel. The first was a generation of idealists and dreamers,



the second a generation of doers and builders.

With that speech, in which he associated Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton with the former generation and claimed the mantle of the latter for himself, Obama fired the first shot in an election battle that's being fought along the dividing lines between these two generational archetypes.

American history suggests that about every 80 years, a civic (or Joshua) generation, emerges to make over the country after a period of upheaval caused by the fervor of an idealist (or Moses) generation. In 1828, 1860, 1896, 1932, and 1968, as members of new generations—alternately idealist and civic—began to vote in large numbers, the United States experienced major political shifts.

This year, the civic-minded millennials, born between 1982 and 2003, are coming of age and promising to turn the political landscape, currently defined by idealist baby boomers such as Clinton and George W. Bush, upside down.

Reared by indulgent parents and driven by deeply held values as adults, members of idealist generations embroil the nation in heated debates on divisive social issues as they try to enact their own personal morality and causes through the political process. (Remember that boomer-era rallying cry, "The personal is political"?)

In the idealist eras that began in 1828 and 1896, the nation divided between the forces of tradition and those advancing a more modern approach to morality. In 1828, Andrew Jackson's Democrats gave rural traditionalism a victory. In 1896, the tables were turned as Mark Hanna, the Karl Rove of his day, guided Republican William McKinley to victory over William Jennings Bryan and his agricultural allies, on behalf of industrial-age companies and their urban workers.

By 1968, however, it was the Republicans' turn to take up the cause of traditional values—and end an era of dominance by a Democratic Party that seemed increasingly unable to maintain "law and order." Richard Nixon's victory in 1968 began an era of seven Republican presidential victories and firmly established the GOP as a traditionalist party.

It may surprise some to see baby boomers, so often represented as a generation of peaceniks and civil rights activists, producing this Republican realignment.

But boomers were—and still are—a highly divided generation that actually tilts a bit to the right. On the college campuses of the 1960s there were twice as many members of the right-wing Young Americans for Freedom as of the left-wing Students for a Democratic Society.

It's no different 40 years later. A survey done last month by the media research company Frank N. Magid Associates



found that twice as many boomers call themselves conservative as liberal. The only thing that unites this generation are its members' efforts to impose their diametrically opposed ideals, values, and morality on everyone else through the political process.

Though each party has come out on top in one idealist era or another, the end result has been weaker government institutions and political deadlock. As politics becomes more polarized, voters sour on the two political parties. In the 1950s, most voters had favorable attitudes toward at least one and often both parties, but by the 1990s, most had negative impressions of both.

Because idealist generations are unwilling to compromise on moral issues, they've always failed to solve the major social and economic problems of their eras.

In the decades after the 1828 election, the country was pulled apart over slavery, ultimately leading to the Civil War. After the 1896 campaign, the United States couldn't find a way to help blue-collar workers and farmers to share fully in the wealth generated by the Industrial Revolution.

It took the Great Depression to usher in the sense of urgency that led to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Today, issues such as affordable health care or quality education or climate change are endlessly debated but never resolved by two sides unwilling to set aside their ideological agendas for the common good.



Photos courtesy Vance Moss



But now, with another civic generation emerging, the times, as boomer troubadour Bob Dylan sang, they are a-changin'. Civic generations react against the idealist generations' efforts to use politics to advance their own moral causes and focus instead on reenergizing social, political, and government institutions to solve pressing national issues.

Previous civic realignments occurred in 1860, with the election of Abraham Lincoln, and in 1932, when the GI generation put Roosevelt in office. It's no coincidence that these "civic" presidents, along with George Washington, top all lists of our greatest presidents. All three led the country in resolving great crises

by inspiring and guiding new generations and revitalizing and expanding the federal government.

Today's millennials look a lot like the GI generation, born between 1901 and 1924, which FDR described as having "a rendezvous with destiny" —a phrase Ted Kennedy echoed last week in his endorsement of Obama. In 1930, the GI generation was nearly twice as large as the two previous generations combined. Today's millennials are the largest generation in U.S. history—twice as large as Generation X and numbering a million

more than the baby boomers.

Though nearly 90 percent of the GI generation was white, it was diverse for its time. Many members were immigrants or the children of Catholic and Jewish immigrants. About 40 percent of millennials are of African American, Latino, Asian or racially mixed backgrounds.

Twenty percent have at least one immigrant parent.

Civic generations are committed to political involvement and believe in



using and strengthening political and government institutions. In the 1930s, young members of the GI generation regularly voted in greater numbers than older generations. Similarly, millennials have led this year's surge in voter participation, especially in Democratic contests.

In the New Hampshire Democratic primary, turnout was up by more than 50 percent over 2000 among voters under 30, while among older voters it rose by only a bit more than 10 percent.

According to one research firm that tracks millennials' civic engagement, voters 25 and under accounted for 18 percent of all Democratic voters in New Hampshire this year. In 2000, the same age group (which then consisted mostly of the disaffected Generation X) made up only 13 percent of the New Hampshire Democratic primary vote.

In Iowa, according to CNN, the differences were even more dramatic: Twenty percent of Democratic caucus participants were young voters, four times the number in 2004. Similarly unprecedented levels of voter participation in this year's Democratic elections in Nevada, South Carolina and even Florida's "beauty contest" primary have been driven by the enthusiasm of millennial voters.

Millennials' political style is also similar to the GI generation's. They aren't confrontational or combative, the way boomers (whose generational mantra was "Don't trust anyone over 30") have been. Nor does the millennials' rhetoric reflect the cynicism and alienation of

Generation X, whose philosophy is, "Life sucks, and then you die."

Instead, their political style reflects their generation's constant interaction with hundreds, if not thousands, of "friends" on MySpace or Facebook, about any and all subjects, increasingly including politics.

Since they started watching "Barney" as toddlers, the millennials have learned to be concerned for the welfare of everyone in the group and to try to find consensus, "win-win" solutions to any problem. The result is a collegial approach that attracts millennials to candidates who seek to unify the country and heal the nation's divisions.

Unlike the young baby boomers, millennials want to strengthen the political system, not tear it down. According to a study last year by the Pew Research Center, most millennials (64 percent) disagree that the federal government is wasteful and inefficient, while most older Americans (58 percent) think it is.

A 2006 survey by Frank N. Magid Associates indicated that millennials are more likely than older generations to believe that politicians care what people think and are more concerned with the good of the country than of their political party. It also showed that millennials, more than their elders, believe that U.S. political institutions will deal effectively with concerns the nation will face in the future. Given the public's disapproval of both Congress and President Bush, we're going to need all the optimism and change we can generate to overcome those challenges. Luckily, the millennial generation, like its GI generation forebears, is arriving right on time to deliver just what America needs. [Washington Post, Feb.3, 2008.]

Morley Winograd, a former adviser to Vice President Al Gore, and Michael D. Hais are co-authors of "Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics," to be published next month. [millmakeover@gmail.com].



Photos [from left]: Young Marines campaigning in Phoenix, AZ. Middle: Doctors Vance and Vince Moss, twins born in MD and working in PA, leased a jet out of their own pocket and have provided medical care in Afghanistan twice. They are in Iraq now with their Army Reserve Unit.