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David Halberstam on “A Modest Generation”

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Historian David Halberstam, one of the most popular and influential historians of modern America, reflected on his generation as his Harvard class of 1955 celebrated its fiftieth reunion. In “[A Modest Generation](#),” published in the May-June 2005 issue of *The Harvard Magazine*, Halberstam characterized his generation and the vast changes that have reshaped America over the last half-century.

Consider these selected insights: *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.*

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 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.

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