

Cursed by the Boomers

R. R. RENO MARCH 1, 2023

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What's wrong with America? There's a two-word answer: Baby Boomers. It's more complicated than that, of course. No generation exists in a vacuum. Baby Boomers may praise themselves as revolutionary and transformative, but as a member of that bulging cohort born between 1946 and 1964, I can attest that we did not so much rebel against our parents as insist on their principles and criticize their compromises. The upshot was an intense and often self-congratulatory moralism. Captive to this moralism, Baby Boomers have been unable to provide sound leadership.

With the exception of Jimmy Carter, who was at the time a midshipman at the Naval Academy, every president from Dwight Eisenhower to the first George Bush had served in active duty during World War II. From JFK to the first Bush, these men were members of what's known as the Greatest Generation, born in the early decades of the twentieth century. They reached adulthood during the Great Depression and World War II, years of great trial in our nation's history. For all the braggadocio implicit in the epithet "Greatest Generation," the leading figures of this cohort were not cocksure but confident. Their youthful experiences gave them a strong

sense of how precarious peace and prosperity are. They also knew that life often involves hard choices and painful compromises. This truth is especially evident in times of war, when futile measures and great waste of life and resources are plain to see.

Reinhold Niebuhr was something of a sage for the Greatest Generation. After a youthful dalliance with radical politics, Niebuhr recognized that the fall of man puts severe limits on what we can achieve in public life, no matter how pure our intentions, which in any event are never as pure as we imagine. He criticized what he called the Renaissance view of man as perfectible, and he argued for the biblical view, which he deemed more in line with an older, tragic sensibility than with the modern, progressive outlook.

According to the ancient Greeks, tragedy arises because heroic action always comes at a cost. The best and most honorable sentiments catapult us into impossible situations. Niebuhr adapts this view to a Christian perspective. He observes that moral idealism, though pristine in theory, disarms us in the face of human sinfulness and the persistence of evil. In the service of grand ambitions to “end all wars” or ensure “equity,” we are tempted to deny reality. As a consequence, at best, we fail to do what good can actually be done. (Niebuhr opposed the sentimental pacifism that was influential in many circles during the 1930s.) At worst, our utopian ambitions underwrite unspeakable cruelties, which we baptize as expressions of our highest ideals.

Against this kind of moralism, Niebuhr advocated what came to be called Christian realism. The “Christian” component retained moral zeal, which the “realism” tempered with sober recognition of the limits that

circumscribe human endeavor. Thus the “tragic” view: The Christian realist sees that we are called to witness to Christ-like love, while also recognizing that in culture, economics, and politics, love’s selfless idealism must make compromises, some grievous and painful.

By and large, the leadership of the Greatest Generation successfully balanced the American tradition of righteous moralism with a sober recognition of limits. Their agonized approach to civil rights for black Americans serves as an example. It was a policy of half-measures until the mid-1960s, when the go-slow approach became unsustainable. Women’s liberation, gay liberation, and other cultural changes were handled in the same way. These projects were endorsed with political caution. We can see a similar balance in foreign affairs. The Cold War was at once a struggle against the Evil Empire, as Reagan famously put it, and a geopolitical conflict that required us to cultivate unsavory allies—or, as with South Vietnam president Ngo Dinh Diem, orchestrate their demise. It would be absurd to imagine that John F. Kennedy did not believe in American values. Yet he signed off on Diem’s overthrow (which ended in his execution), judging it a tragic necessity in the struggle against international communism.

Say what you will about the Cold War and its many moral compromises, you cannot gainsay the outcome. Consider as well the Gulf War. In retrospect, the greatest accomplishment of George H. W. Bush was not to defeat Saddam Hussein. Rather, it was to refrain from deposing him and attempting to transform that country. He understood the limits of American power—the limits of any worldly power.

In 1992, Bill Clinton defeated George H. W. Bush. Clinton's presidency inaugurated a string of Baby Boomers in high office—not just in the White House, but in investment banks, corporations, media, and universities. With Clinton and his cohort came a changed moral outlook, one quite different from the tragic view Reinhold Niebuhr commended.

For college-educated Boomers, Vietnam epitomized the immoral methods used to promote American interests during the Cold War. The uncompromising moralism of the anti-war movement played an important role in the Boomers' formation. It is telling that Baby Boomer presidents kept their distance from the U.S. military. Although Clinton, Bush, and Obama had distinct views and pursued different policies, over their combined twenty-four years in power, they all embodied their generation's ambivalence about American power.

But one cannot be a pacifist and serve as the commander in chief of the most powerful military machine in human history. More broadly, one cannot play a leading role in American society without endorsing, nay, championing ever greater American power. The solution for Baby Boomers like Clinton, Bush, and Obama was to recast the hard realities of America's global dominance as heroic expressions of our highest ideals.

The Clinton administration marked the arrival of globalism as a win-win justification for American hegemony. We were not an empire. On the contrary, we were the neutral umpire in a world order knitted together by commerce, overseen by international agencies like the WTO, and given moral luster by a commitment to human rights. American global leadership (always "leadership," never dominance) would lift millions out of poverty, secure human rights, promote freedom, put an end to great-power

competition, and make war obsolete. From Clinton onward, our center-left establishment promoted globalist ideologies of one sort or another. Our center-right establishment may be cautious about sacrificing American sovereignty to international institutions, but it has been no less enthusiastic about globalization.

This fusion of what's best for America with what's best for the world was intoxicating for Baby Boomers. I recently reread a 2002 White House document outlining our national security strategy. It features an introduction by George W. Bush that exemplifies the recasting of American interests as millenarian statements about the end of history. Bush treats the end of the Cold War as a decisive victory for "the forces of freedom." There exists "a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise." In effect, becoming like America is the only viable future for the entire world.

Bush never stipulates that the rest of the world must "become like America" in so many words. How could he? The whole point of his rhetoric was to assure himself that he was at the helm of the gigantic killing machine that is the United States military not merely to protect and promote American interests, but in order to bring the blessings of liberty to every corner of the earth. The final paragraph of Bush's introduction reveals the self-deception:

Freedom is the non-negotiable demand of human dignity; the birthright of every person—in every civilization. Throughout history, freedom has been threatened by war and terror; it has been challenged by the clashing wills of powerful states and

evil designs of tyrants; and it has been tested by widespread poverty and disease. Today, humanity holds in its hands the opportunity to further freedom's triumph over all these foes. The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission.

One is hard pressed to imagine a more utopian vision—freedom's triumph over all its foes! But Bush was president of the United States, not of the world. Moreover, this document and its urgency stemmed from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. There can be no doubt that Bush was concerned for the weal and woe of Americans.

We can substitute *America* or *American interests* for the key word “freedom” in this final paragraph without altering the strategic implications. Indeed, if we make these substitutions, Bush's words become more faithful to events. Here is my rendering in that spirit:

Being American is the non-negotiable demand of human dignity; the birthright of every person—in every civilization. Throughout history, American interests have been threatened by war and terror; they have been challenged by clashing wills of powerful states and evil designs of tyrants. . . . Today, humanity holds in its hands the opportunity to further America's triumph over all these foes. The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission.

To speak about America in this way seems rather grandiose. But in truth, both versions, Bush's actual words and my rendition, border on the delusional. This is perhaps to be expected. Baby Boomers were intoxicated by the fusion of hard responsibilities with the most exalted moral idealism. An intoxicated person has blurred vision and a tenuous grasp on reality, and he often makes bad judgments.

One need not be a foreign policy expert to recognize that the last thirty years have been marked by bad judgments. Our extended adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan are obvious examples. Our engagement with China is another. In the 1990s, an end-of-history mentality convinced our leadership class that giving China preferential treatment in trade would lead to the evolution of that country into a liberal democratic partner. Events proved otherwise. Our policies over the last three decades have created a powerful adversary. The expansion of NATO has been perhaps another ill-considered endeavor, although the ultimate significance of that policy probably depends on how we manage the war in Ukraine.

Baby Boomer leaders, enamored of their moralism, have blundered because they lack a tragic sensibility. They refuse to acknowledge the realities that always limit what can be achieved, and they shrink from the often ugly, even cruel compromises that are necessary in a fallen world. The United States, which after the first Gulf War enjoyed a reputation of invincibility and unsurpassable power, now faces a global situation in which it must carefully husband resources in order to contain powerful adversaries and protect its empire.

A similar anti-tragic moralism has characterized our approaches to economic and cultural matters over the last thirty years. Adam Smith

recognized that society as a whole benefits from the wealth created by private enterprise. But he also noted the corrosive effects of naked self-interest on the body politic. The wise statesman must encourage private enterprise, but also cabin its excesses.

In the postwar years, free-market thinking entertained a more utopian outlook. It held that private greed need not be restrained, for the market system translates it into wealth creation that benefits society. This notion has been catnip to Baby Boomers. Just as the anti-war movement made them ambivalent about American power, the moralism of the 1960s disparaged the ordinary ambition to make money. (One must not become a “sellout.”) For this reason, Baby Boomers have desperately wished to believe that getting rich is the best way to make the world a better place.

In no sense were the followers of Milton Friedman the only ones who fused getting rich with doing good. Our center-left establishment has embraced “creativity” as the great gift that the winners in the new globalized and knowledge-based economy bestow on us all. Tech moguls are not plutocrats; they are “innovators.” A good history of the transformation of the Democratic Party into the political home of the richest and best educated Americans has yet to be written. When this story is told, the progressive strategies for redefining getting rich as one or another act of beneficent social transformation will play a leading role. “Woke capitalism” is simply the latest stage in the Baby Boomers’ transfiguration of their hunger for wealth into a great achievement of social justice.

Men of my father’s generation were ambitious, but they were not deceived about our system. They recognized that it does not work well for everyone.

By contrast, successful Baby Boomers desperately want to believe that their motives are pure and their gains come at no cost to others.

Sadly, the opposite is true. The Boomers have accumulated wealth at a terrible price. Bill Clinton was born in 1946. Economic data show that members of his cohort had a more than 80-percent chance of being wealthier at age thirty than their parents had been. This is the American dream: to do better and get ahead. But after the 1970s, the trend line went in decline. A person born in 1993 will turn thirty this year. Data suggest that an individual from this cohort has a less than 50/50 chance of making more than his parents did at the same age. Nearly all Baby Boomers have done better than their parents. At least half the members of the rising generation will do worse than theirs.

The win-win delusions of the Baby Boomers make it almost impossible for our leaders to acknowledge this reality. Consider the “makers and takers” comments of Mitt Romney in 2012 and Hillary Clinton’s “deplorables” remarks from 2016. These two politicians, both born in 1947, are peak Boomers. Their comments reflect their attempts to explain why things are not going well in our country. By their way of thinking, the problem is not globalization and its resulting economy, the foundations of which were laid in the 1990s. Romney and Clinton say, in effect: “Our leadership has been great. Unfortunately, a large sector of our society won’t take advantage of the great opportunities we’ve opened up for everyone.”

I believe in free markets, and I regard welfare programs as necessary, perhaps, but dangerous because they can create a culture of dependence that undermines human dignity. In that respect, Romney’s “takers” remark makes some sense. But our leaders need to face reality.

In my lifetime we have gone from a middle-class paradise in which high-school-educated adults could buy suburban homes, send their children to decent public schools, trailer a boat to a lake for summer vacation, and even save some money—and all this on one salary—to what is very nearly the opposite. Recently, I had coffee with my niece in San Diego. She is a medical resident at UCSD. We talked about marriage and children. She sighed, “Yes, but I don’t think my fiancé and I will ever be able to buy a house.” If a young doctor is saying this, imagine what the UPS truck driver is thinking.

Then there is the problem that major sectors of our economy are so dependent on China that they cannot be trusted to consider the interests of ordinary Americans. A friend of mine is the CEO of a mid-sized financial firm. He told me I would be shocked to know how many major players on Wall Street are beholden to the Chinese Communist Party. Large companies kowtow to Chairman Xi, and our professional sports leagues happily endorse charges that our country is racist while very carefully avoiding any criticism of China.

The American economy has become perverse. The last forty years have not seen decades of GDP decline. On the contrary, GDP has increased. New industries have emerged and produced great wealth. How is it possible that half of my fellow citizens have zero net worth?

The Baby Boomer temptation is to double down on the win-win ideologies that baptize their material success as public service. They tell us we need to cut regulation more, or do more to promote innovation, or in some other fashion clear the way for the “creative class.” But the truth is that we need to make significant and perhaps painful changes to the American

economy's rules of the road. The first step is to face reality, which does not speak well of Baby Boomer leaders.

The same Boomer mentality obtains in debates about immigration, multiculturalism, and other social issues. As I was growing up, America reached peak homogeneity. In 1970, less than 5 percent of the country's population was foreign-born, a historic low. In view of this profound cultural stability, Baby Boomers entertained anxieties (some legitimate) about the conformist pressures and banalities of the vast middle-class consensus that held in their youths. They read Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* and went to India to join ashrams. Patriotism was viewed as chauvinism. For a Baby Boomer, a society that is of one mind and united around a common cause feels claustrophobic, perhaps proto-fascistic.

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act inaugurated profound demographic change. We are now at a century-high level of heterogeneity, with nearly 15 percent of our population foreign-born. The once dominant middle-class consensus is denounced as racist, patriarchal, and homophobic. Our educational system preaches the gospel of multiculturalism. Whether on balance these are positive developments, or perhaps inevitable given historical realities, I don't want to debate. My concern is with the lack of a tragic sense. The demographic and cultural transformations of American society are sold to us by Baby Boomers as a win-win. Obama, the master of this rhetoric, rang the changes on the absurd claim that "diversity is our strength." (For the record, unity is our strength, as our venerable motto *E pluribus unum* reminds us.)

The Boomers sought to make American society less censorious and conformist, more open and inclusive. They have largely achieved this goal,

but at a cost they refuse to acknowledge.

In 1960, 8 percent of births were illegitimate. Today the rate is 40 percent —worse when we control for education. If you were born in 2021 to a mother with only a high school diploma, the odds are against your being raised by your mother and father. Recent decades have also seen increases in destructive patterns such as drug abuse, lack of social involvement, and chronic unemployment. Our Baby Boomer leaders have worked to liberalize attitudes, to the point of enforcing punitive political correctness, on the theory that more Americans will flourish and reach their full potentials. The reality is otherwise. Far more people are morally and personally shipwrecked today than were in the past. It turns out that an “inclusive” society requires destroying the social norms that discipline us. We have what Baby Boomers desire, an open society, and it is dysfunctional.

In 2021, the death toll from heroin and fentanyl overdoses exceeded 100,000. What has been done in response to a drug epidemic that has killed nearly a million people since 1999? Little. Meanwhile, Baby Boomers press forward with the legalization of marijuana. This measure fits with their win-win mentality. The best way to reduce crime is to decriminalize. If we make our society more accepting and less judgmental, more open and less conformist, then we’ll be more harmonious and happy. As the sour mood of the American public indicates, the opposite is true.

America needs leaders who accept the tragic character of human history. It is not the case that the Clintons, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and other Baby Boomer leaders kept their hands clean. In politics, business, media, and other fields, Boomers have waged fierce

battles for wealth, power, and prestige. They have made endless compromises. The problem rests in their moral outlook more than their concrete goals. They have been seduced by philosophies, ideologies, and slogans that decree dirty hands to be clean—or that glove them with purportedly noble enterprises and fake virtues. (“Creativity” is one of those fake virtues, among the most egregious.)

One does not have to have faith in order to be a good leader. But it certainly helps. A religious believer knows himself to be a sinner. He is aware of the persistence of evil and the fragility of the good. Such a person is capable of bad judgment. We’re all foredoomed to make mistakes. But he is less tempted to blind himself with a self-complimenting moralism that clothes his motives and actions in gimcrack virtues and seduces him with false descriptions of reality—as George W. Bush did when he imagined that by turning the Middle East into a warzone he was promoting the global triumph of freedom. A less moralistic and more tragic sensibility allows us to see that he was attacking our country’s enemies. The same tragic sense allows us to see that when Barack Obama framed identity politics as a millenarian utopia of “diversity” he was obscuring the truth. The ideology of multiculturalism disguises our ruling class’s mismanagement of an increasingly fractious and culturally disintegrated country.

Of late, I have found myself quoting Charles Péguy: “We must always tell what we see. Above all, and this is more difficult, we must always see what we see.” If we’re to put our ship of state back on course, the rising generation will need the courage to face reality. And it will need to push

the Baby Boomers to the side. May that day come sooner rather than later.

R. R. Reno is editor of First Things.