



How the Boomers Ruined ~~Everything~~ **SAVED** Everything

Yes, we're spoiled rotten. We're self-absorbed. And it seems like we'll never shut up. But the boomers made a better world for everyone else. You're welcome

By P.J. O'Rourke



W

e're the largest, richest, best-educated generation of Americans, the favored children of a strong, confident and prosperous country. Or, as other generations call us, spoiled brats. Born between 1946 and 1964, the 76 million boomers reaped all the benefits of the postwar period's extraordinary economic growth.

We were dizzy with our aspirations. We'd be rock stars. We'd be spiritual avatars. We'd be social activists. We'd be billionaires. No, better yet, we'd be all those things at the same time. (Steve Jobs came close.)

Every time opportunity knocked, we let it in, even when it should have been locked out for decency's sake. And behold the boomers' remarkable

experiments with prosperity—the dot-com bubble, the housing bubble, the enormous financial bubble that's still got the nation trying to get fiduciary gum out of its hair.

And now the boomers run the world. The youngest members of the generation that decided to be young forever are turning 50. That's the age of maximum privilege and power. We're giving everybody orders. The oldest boomers are enrolled in Medicare, collecting Social Security and receiving tax-free Roth IRA disbursements. Plus, American life expectancy has increased by almost 12 years since the baby boom was born, so it doesn't just *seem* like we'll never go away. From President Obama, Rand Paul and Jeff Bezos at one end of our age cohort to Hillary

Clinton, Rush Limbaugh and Cher at the other, we cannot be escaped or avoided (or shushed).

But running the world means taking responsibility for it. The boomers have been good at taking things: Mom's car without permission, drugs, umbrage at the establishment, draft deferments, advantage of the sexual revolution, and credit for the civil rights and women's liberation movements that rightly belongs to prior generations. The one thing that can be left in plain sight without us putting our sticky mitts on it is responsibility. Ask our therapists. Or the parents we haven't visited at the extended-care facility.

The world is being run by irresponsible spoiled brats. And yet the world started to get better as soon as the boomers took over. That was in the late 1970s, when we were old enough for our deepest beliefs, our most cherished values and our unique vision of the future to have a profound and permanent effect on American life. To be precise, we took over on July 28, 1978, the day *Animal House* was released.

The world is run by irresponsible brats. And yet the world got better as soon as the boomers took over.

Things have been more fun since we elected Senator Bluntarsky. Sometimes too much fun. The boomers can be scolded for promiscuous sex, profligate use of illegal intoxicants, and other behavior that didn't turn out to be healthy. But somebody had to do the research. Somebody had to be the guinea pig. And, running around

in the sex-drugs-and-rock 'n' roll wheel, we had a good time while it lasted.

This is how we brought down the Berlin Wall. Ronald Reagan and

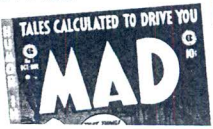
ILLUSTRATION BY ANDY FRIEDMAN

BOOMER MILESTONES

1946 First boomers born; Dr. Spock's *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* published

1952 First issue of *Mad* magazine

1964 Last baby boomers born

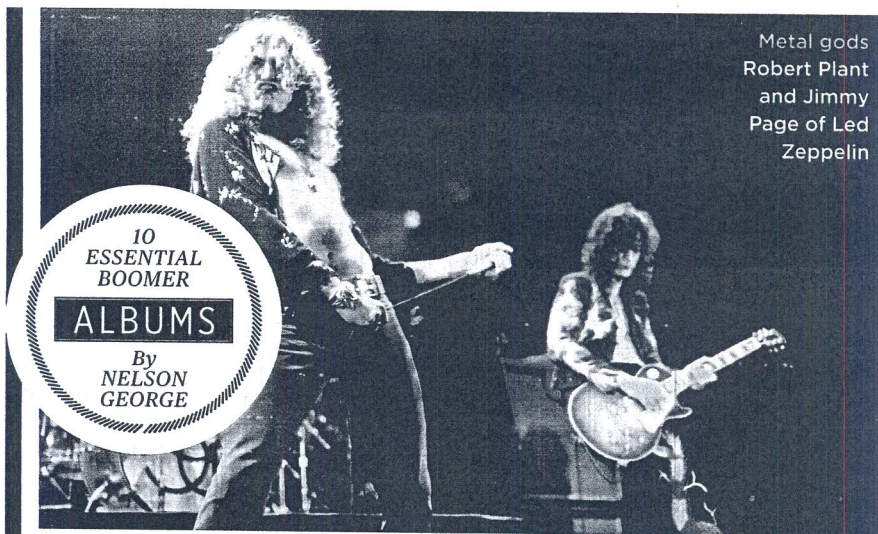


Mikhail Gorbachev get the kudos, but we were the ones who tagged the Wall with all that awesome graffiti. When people our age on the wrong side of the Berlin Wall saw how much fun people our age on the right side of the Berlin Wall were having, it was all over with the Communist bloc. Today the Soviet Union is just a collection of countries with too many K's and Z's in their names, and China is the kind of dictatorship whose idea of world conquest is domination of the global smartphone manufacturing sector. We're the generation that laughed off totalitarianism.

Little wonder that we've created a political system best known for producing comedy. A Rasmussen poll from a few years ago found that 32 percent of Americans under 40 think that satirical TV programs such as *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* are replacing traditional news outlets. You can't really blame them, considering the news that Senator Blunt and his colleagues generate. And yet, although partisan polarization may have Washington deadlocked, there are worse things than a deadlocked Washington—such as a unified Washington marching boldly forward toward disaster in Vietnam when the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed in 1964 (with a vote of 416-0 in the House, 88-2 in the Senate).

Anyway, we're not "polarized." We're just bickering on the Capitol Hill playground. We love to argue. Half the boomers want more social services, to be paid for by other people. And half the boomers are those other people. At our age, we can't always remember which half we're in. For me, it depends on the day. Some days I'm a Part D prescription drug beneficiary; some days it's April 15.

We're also the generation that laughed off the kind of casual bigotry once widely acceptable in American



Metal gods Robert Plant and Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin

Bob Dylan Highway 61 Revisited (1965)

Dylan rankled folk fans by going electric, but he also expanded his audience and influenced a generation with songs that have been analyzed (and lionized) ever since.

The Beatles Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (1967)

The culmination of years of artistic maturation and bold experimentation. The original rock concept LP.

Marvin Gaye What's Goin' On (1971)

The sexy love man took on civil rights, the environment and inner-city turmoil, changing the tone of R&B, both lyrically and musically.



Carole King Tapestry (1971)

King's songs of love lost, found and wasted spoke to the Me-Gen-eration's turn toward introspection.

Led Zeppelin Led Zeppelin IV (1971)

Mystical and bombastic, acoustic and brash, Zeppelin defined '70s rock (and FM radio).

The Rolling Stones Exile on Main Street (1972)

Incorporating blues, soul, country and gospel, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards dug deep into the era's spiritual malaise and made the Stones' most emotional album.

Stevie Wonder Innervisions (1973)

The best of a series of innovative, hit-filled albums Wonder made in a 1970s creative surge, *Innervisions* changed the sound of popular music.

Eagles Their Greatest Hits 1971-1975 (1976)

The Southern California rock band was both romantic and cynical, diluting any sweetness with a bitter edge that reflected the compromises of adulthood.



Bob Marley & the Wailers Exodus (1977)

The sensual, spiritual album that helped make reggae one of the most popular musical genres in the world.

Saturday Night Fever: The Original Movie Sound Track (1977)

The percolating rhythms of disco captured the zest, decadence and hustling of the dance boom.

HONORABLE MENTION

Donna Summer Love to Love You Baby (1975)

Writer, music critic and producer Nelson George is a former editor of *Billboard* magazine.

1966

Time selects Americans "25 and under" as "Man of the Year"

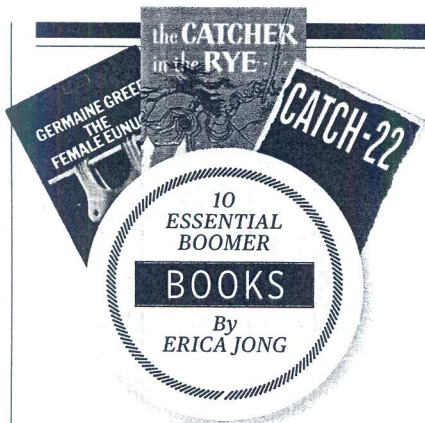
1969

Woodstock



1970

First published use of the term "baby boomer"



J.D. Salinger
***The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)**
 Our adolescent angst defined. (See also: *Franny and Zooey*.)

Joseph Heller
***Catch-22* (1961)**
 The antiwar novel to end all antiwar novels.

James Baldwin
***The Fire Next Time* (1963)**
 The book that awakened *New Yorker* readers to the souls of black Americans.

Mary McCarthy
***The Group* (1963)**
 The book that told us about our mothers' lives.

John Updike
***Couples* (1968)**
 "Welcome to the post-pill paradise," as one liberated character says.

Stewart Brand
***Whole Earth Catalog* (1968)**
 How to be green and save the globe.

Philip Roth
***Portnoy's Complaint* (1969)**
 The penis as an instrument of men's liberation.

Robin Morgan
***Sisterhood Is Powerful* (1970)**
 The book that told us how not to relive our mothers' lives.

Germaine Greer
***The Female Eunuch* (1970)**
 Sexuality is power. Renouncing it only makes us powerless.

Frances Moore Lappé
***Diet for a Small Planet* (1971)**
 The first book to make us aware that Earth's resources are far from infinite.

HONORABLE MENTION
Erica Jong
***Fear of Flying* (1973)**
 Welcome to winged women.

Erica Jong is the author of the novel Fear of Flying, which just celebrated its 40th anniversary.

life. To see how far we've come, compare *All in the Family* with *Modern Family*, two popular TV shows about intergenerational relations in a changing world. The 1970s sitcom was considered groundbreaking because it got laughs from Greatest Generation patriarch Archie Bunker's unreconstructed racism and sexism. The current show is considered groundbreaking because it gets laughs from boomer patriarch Jay Pritchett's bemused confusion about gay marriage, blended families and ... actually, *Modern Family* is not considered groundbreaking. It's just considered funny.

Boomers didn't exactly create a race-blind society, but the kids we've raised might.

This dawned on me when my daughter was 9. She came home from school asking about adoption; she didn't quite understand what it meant. My wife and I explained and said, "You've got friends who are adopted."

"I do?" my daughter answered.

"Suzie Duncan," we said. "Suzie was born in Ethiopia. The Duncans adopted her when she was a baby." The Duncans are pink, freckled, short people of Scots-Irish extraction. Suzie is tall and thin with a luminous anthracite complexion.

My daughter said, "I *thought* Suzie looked different than her mom and dad."

But boomers haven't made life perfect, the way we promised we would back in the 1960s. We promised we wouldn't fight any wars. We were fibbing—we've had seven or eight since Vietnam. However, we

did make them smaller. The United States has suffered more than 5,800 combat deaths in the three decades of the post-Vietnam era. The number is painful, but it's also less—by almost a thousand—than the number of U.S. servicemen who died in just five weeks during the Battle of Iwo Jima.

It would be nice to think the boomers did something to make the world less warlike. More likely, our voracious consumerism has just made the world richer. Gross world product—the total of all the goods and services produced on Earth—increased fivefold between 1975 and 2012, to almost \$72 trillion. There's a

theory that rich people don't like to fight huge wars—itchy uniforms and ugly shoes. China's economy is nearly 40 times larger than it was in 1978. Let's hope the theory's true.

Our own standard of living hasn't climbed at that heady rate, the way the Greatest Generation's did. But we didn't get to start with nothing. In a world destroyed by the Depression and war, every Levittown bungalow looked like the

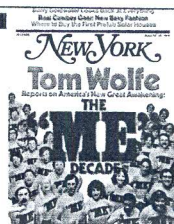
Ritz-Carlton, and a \$20 pay raise was a winning lottery ticket. American family income, adjusted for inflation, grew by about \$25,000 between the late 1940s and the middle 1970s. Since then, it's grown by only about half that amount after adjusting for inflation and has in fact declined overall since 1999. For a so-called sandwich generation—pressed between the demands of kids who aren't yet independent and parents who are getting less so—we haven't put many bean sprouts in the pita pocket.

But a lot more (CONTINUED ON PAGE 64)

For a so-called sandwich generation, we haven't put many bean sprouts in the pita pocket.

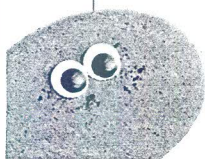
1975
 Pet Rock appears

1976
 Tom Wolfe coins "The Me Decade"



1983
The Big Chill released

1987
 Debut of TV drama *Thirtysomething*

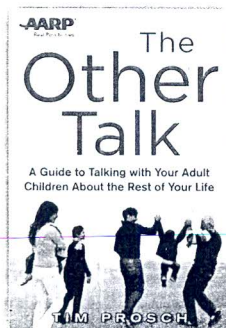


3, 4, 5 and 6 night cruises on the magnificent and historic St. Lawrence and Ottawa Rivers. Montreal, Quebec City, Ottawa, Kingston Departures
1-800-267-7868 StLawrenceCruiseLines.com

THE PARTNERSHIP™ AT DRUGFREE.ORG

Talk with your adult children today.
Take the worry out of tomorrow.

The Other Talk helps parents and their adult children create a partnership to plan for the years to come, guiding them through important conversations and decisions about finances, medical care, and day-to-day living.



Learn more about the book at
aarp.org/OtherTalk

AARP
Real Possibilities

Mc
Graw
Hill
Education

Learn More. Do More.
MHPROFESSIONAL.COM

Now we know why God wanted us to be here.”

“My wife and I worked as missionaries in Asia for many years,” says Dan. “And we have lots of friends all over the world. When Charlotte died, we had to stop them from jumping on a plane—though many of them did.

“As former missionaries, we’re often asked, ‘Why did a loving God let this happen?’ Our response is always: ‘God didn’t orchestrate this. It breaks God’s heart. This is not what he would choose.’”

THE FORGOTTEN MOURNERS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 50

Create a legacy Family members can plant a tree, start a scholarship in the loved one’s name or launch a new family ritual.

Expect a bumpy ride Grief is unpredictable; it can revive old, forgotten pains, such as a miscarriage or the death of a parent. This is normal. The bereaved should honor these feelings as part of the process.

Take a breather Grieving grandparents should give themselves permission to rest. They might visit a friend or a place that nourishes—a place where they don’t have to be strong for the family. “Find what coping mechanisms help you most,” Moore recommends. “It takes time and patience—there are no quick fixes.” —*Leah Dobkin*

Ronald,

Paying too much for your prescriptions? Use AARP’s Drug Savings Tool to find less expensive, but equally effective alternatives to the prescription medications you’re currently taking. Go to www.aarp.org/drugsavings5.

things now come standard with our standard of living, thanks to all the great stuff we’ve invented. In 1978 few people had a personal computer, and if they did, it took up half the house. There was no GPS in your car. The Greatest Generation was lost all the time. You had to go to the library to look things up, and then you couldn’t because the Dewey Decimal System made it impossible to figure out whether Dewey ran for president against FDR, defeated the Spanish navy in the Battle of Manila Bay or invented the Dewey Decimal System. We may not have managed America’s money well, but the boomers’ demand for more and better gizmos has filled the nation with amazing playthings, from tiny talking computers to gigantic flat-screen TVs with roughly 2,000 channels to watch on them. We’re the generation that will die with the most toys.

Until that day finally comes, we’ll still be riding our bicycles, jamming in garage bands and wearing jeans and T-shirts. We’re famously careful about the way we raise our kids, because somebody has to grow up. It won’t be us.

And what about those kids? Will Generation X and the Millennials do a better job running the world than the boomers have? Let’s hope so. But first they’ll have to move out of our basements.

Humorist and political reporter P.J. O’Rourke is the author of The Baby Boom: How It Got That Way ... And It Wasn’t My Fault ... And I’ll Never Do It Again ...