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# The Kids Are All Right



By Marty Kaplan

It was a lucky coincidence that Freshmen Parents Weekend at my daughter's college, which was also my college, came right on the heels of the presidential election.

Lucky for me, because the weekend mercifully obliterated my nostalgia for the tumult of my own undergraduate career. Lucky for the country, because what happened there on election night occurred as well on campuses across the country. It turns out the kids are all right after all.

The college in question is Harvard. I was a student there during the '60s, an era that actually slopped over a bit into the '70s, and a time I have fondly thought back on as The Revolution.

Both my sophomore and junior years were cut short — classes and exams were canceled — because of student reaction, and administrative overreaction, to the Vietnam War, the invasion of Cambodia and the draft. My classmates, and sometimes I, picketed when Dow Chemical, maker of napalm, came to campus to recruit, and when the U.S. military, user of napalm, also came to campus to recruit. To protest the war, students did things like occupy buildings, which led to the protesters being tear-gassed and billy-clubbed. The killing of four students by national guardsmen at Kent State triggered a student strike. The end of student deferments and the institution of a Selective Service lottery prompted marches and mobilizations. Professors, dazed and confused, took to holding classes outside and turning them into “teach-ins” and “rap sessions.”

It was disorienting, it was scary — and it was wonderful.

Not to my parents, of course, who were clearly uneasy about my lengthening hair, widening bell-bottoms and anti-war mouth, all of which were alarmingly evident at their welcome-home-from-Vietnam party for my older brother.

Nor was it wonderful to the fledgling neoconservatives on campus and their fellow travelers beyond it, who dismissed our protests as drug-addled self-indulgence, promiscuity masquerading as liberation,

privileged kids play-acting as proletarians and the consequence of too many permissive parents paying too much heed to Dr. Spock.

Nor was it wonderful to the college's administrators. A few years after we graduated, the Harvard president with whom we had crossed swords, divinity scholar Nathan Pusey, told a Harvard professor that my cohort, the class of '71, had surely been Harvard's "worst class ever." Worst class ever! What a tribute! When this lament appeared in an article in the Harvard alumni magazine, it so tickled my classmates that from then on the hats and T-shirts at our college reunions have been proudly emblazoned with the acronym WCE.

Since then, and until last week, I had regarded those years as the high-water mark of political engagement by American youth — not just among my classmates, but across the country. The presidential election of 1972, which for the first time included 18-year-olds, saw the highest-ever participation by young voters. The peace movement may not have ended the war, but it marked the beginning of the end. Human relations may not have been forever transformed by our self-conscious consciousness-raising, but it is arguable that without it, neither feminism nor gay rights would have burst onto the American scene with the power that they did.

The downward trajectory of youth political engagement since then has been dispiriting. As the percentage of young people turning out to vote has declined, the mitigating straw I have always grasped at has been the concurrent increase in youth voluntarism — the proliferation of service-oriented local activism that came to be called the "thousand points of light." But the rise of voluntarism among Gen X, Gen Y and the Millennials, however beneficial to its clients and fulfilling to its practitioners, has always seemed — to me, anyway — an unfortunate step away from the public square, from civic engagement, from actual politics.

Last week, that changed.

Don't get me wrong: The kids at Harvard still mentor fifth-grade girls in South Boston who need role models to become strong women. They still tutor immigrants preparing for their citizenship examination. They still work the counter at AIDS thrift shops. (I didn't pick those examples at random; it's some of what I learned my daughter has been up to in her first eight weeks at college.)

But these kids also do politics. During this past presidential election, they worked phone banks and walked precincts and raised money. They volunteered in campaign field offices and lobbied their bubbies to support their candidate. And they voted. Eighteen- to 29-year olds turned out in record-breaking numbers on Nov. 4 — up to 24 million of them in one estimate, a nearly 25 percent increase over 2004. Their demographic was crucial in electing Obama. And when the networks announced his win, the lawns of Harvard Yard and the streets of Cambridge spontaneously filled with thousands of whooping and cheering young citizens.

It didn't happen just at Harvard; as I learned anecdotally, eruptions of student excitement occurred on campuses from coast to coast. And not just on campuses: As I drove across Los Angeles on election night, I saw clusters of teens and kids in their 20s celebrating on random street corners, high-fiving drivers at red

lights. They may not have marched on the Pentagon to end the war in Iraq, but they have given the nation a new president who has pledged to do just that. For the first time since the springtime of the baby boomers, they have become not just consumers to be marketed to, but a political force to be reckoned with.

And because they have already been deeply engaged in providing services to their neighbors and their communities, because they have seen the scale of social neediness with their own eyes, they know firsthand that neither voluntarism nor the market is going to be enough to meet the horrendous problems of society — poverty, joblessness, bad health, bad schools and despair.

Of course, if you believe that the wrong man was elected president, you will find in my account yet more evidence that elites are antagonistic to the real America. But if you are still stunned, and happily so, by the outcome of the race, you may find hope, as I do, in a new generation's political engagement. I realized last weekend that I could safely retire my tales of the good old days on the barricades. These kids don't need encouragement to emulate us. They have come boldly into their own, and it is a deep pleasure for at least this one *alter-kacker* to make way for them.

(This is my column in *The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles*, where you can email me if you'd like.)

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