

OK BOOMER, LET'S TALK

How My Generation Got Left Behind

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Introduction

A conservative radio host called it “the n-word of ageism.” A Supreme Court justice asked if saying it while deciding whether or not to hire someone might qualify as age discrimination. The novelist and critic Francine Prose suggested it was evidence of bigotry against the elderly.

OK Boomer.

No, it’s not nice. But a petty insult isn’t what started the generation wars. It was merely the first return fire to really sting Boomers, in a battle nearly as old as the millennium.

Can you blame us for firing back? The Millennial stereotype of an indulged, immature, hypersensitive narcissist is a convenient mask for the ugly realities that make our lives emotionally and economically precarious—realities set in motion by Baby Boomers. “OK Boomer” is more than

just an imperious insult; it's frustrated Millennial shorthand for the ways the same people who created so many of our problems now pin the blame on us. It's us realizing we're never going to win inane arguments over our own purported ineptitude, and so best to just short-circuit the debate.

Older Americans have been maligning Millennials since the oldest of our generation graduated high school, and "Millennial" continues to be used interchangeably with "young." But Millennials were born between 1980 and 1996, which means the youngest Millennials are in their midtwenties, while the oldest are pushing forty. We are widely chastised but poorly understood. Conservative news outlets still dedicate entire segments to lampooning easily triggered Millennial college students—even though most college students are Gen Zers. In a press briefing in March 2020, White House officials suggested that Millennials bore disproportionate responsibility for America's COVID-19 outbreak. "Hey, millennials, this isn't

spring break. It's a pandemic," the *Philadelphia Daily News* tweeted. Early in the outbreak, a *New York Times* article asserted that Millennials, many of whom entered the workforce into the 2008 recession, "are now facing their first economic crisis."

The tropes are almost passé at this point: Millennials want participation trophies for everything. We're delicate special snowflakes demanding safe spaces and trigger warnings. We're obsessed with identity politics and sneer "Check your privilege" instead of debating in good faith. We're socialism-curious at best, America-hating communists at worst. We expect to be rewarded and promoted and head-patted and hand-held. We're at once too self-involved and too concerned with the feelings of everyone else. We want immediate gratification and crave the affirmation of "likes" and retweets. We're self-indulgent perpetual adolescents who refuse to grow up. We live in Mom's basement, don't have a job, don't have babies, don't even pay rent. We gorge on avocado toast instead of

buying homes. The cartoon image of the Millennial, the writer Jia Tolentino put it in *The New Yorker*, is “a twitchy and phone-addicted pest who eats away at beloved American institutions the way boll weevils feed on crops.” An abridged list of the beloved institutions we’ve killed: America, American cheese, the American dream, banks, bar soap, beer, business wear, cable television, canned tuna, cars, casual dining restaurants, cereal, college football, credit, cruises, dairy, democracy, department stores, diamonds, dinner dates, doorbells, dress codes, the European Union, fabric softener, golf, gyms, Home Depot, hotels, light yogurt, lottery tickets, marriage, mayonnaise, McMansions, motherhood, motorcycles, napkins, razors, sex in parks, and wine corks. We are, as one book’s title put it, “The Dumbest Generation.”

The first big outpouring of “OK Boomer” was on TikTok, in response to a video of an older man proclaiming that “Millennials and Generation Z have the Peter Pan syndrome: they don’t ever want to grow up; they think

that the utopian ideals that they have in their youth are somehow going to translate into adulthood. And that somehow they’re going to create this utopian society in which everything is equal.” “OK Boomer,” came the irreverent Gen Z reply. The meme exploded into the mainstream when the journalist Taylor Lorenz wrote about it in the *New York Times*. Off of TikTok and into the pages of the *Gray Lady*, “OK Boomer” suddenly had Boomers’ attention.

Tired of being lectured and scorned by the older folks who torched their futures, teenagers and twentysomethings struck back, and “OK Boomer” was their revenge. Now it’s emblazoned on t-shirts and tote bags. It’s the go-to dismissal of a bad tweet or a parental command. Fox even filed to secure a trademark on it (they failed).

Meanwhile, Millennials picked up the meme and ran with it.

One irony in the story of this generation war is the close personal ties between Boomers and Millennials. Boomers were the original parent-

friends, developing relationships with their children that put authority aside in favor of genuine respect and mutual connection. In the process of writing this book, I heard from hundreds of Millennials via both survey and in individual interviews. Most of the Millennials I talked to were critical of Boomers as a generation—“selfish” was the most common descriptor—but said that their own Boomer parents were great. “OK Boomer” doesn’t mean *my* Boomer; I’m talking about Boomers out in the wild.

Many of these same Millennials were quick to note that our Boomer parents gave us a nurturing base from which to grow. They encouraged us to do what we love, pursue our passions, and never settle. They allowed us the room to explore creative fields and seek meaningful work. They modeled good parenting, and, for many Millennials with kids, Boomer parents fill the holes in our thin safety net by helping out with childcare. For all of this, many of us are individually grateful.

But much of what individual Boomers did for the benefit of their own kids their generation didn’t do for society at large. Instead, they hoarded resources for themselves. They redirected tax dollars toward their own entitlements and away from investments in younger generations, enjoying the security of Medicare and Social Security while we struggle to get decent health care and look forward to empty federal coffers when we retire. They refused to adequately combat the threat of climate change. They walked back earlier progress toward racial equality, which left our more diverse generation broke and struggling. They allowed the gap between the wealthiest few and the poorest many to expand into a vast gulf. So yes, we’re a little resentful. And when Boomers then berate us for a litany of perceived flaws? We get angry.



The generations at a glance.

A quick note on terminology here: I'm using "Baby Boomer" to mean people who were born between 1946 and 1964 and "Millennial" to mean people who were born between 1980 and 1996 (there's also Gen X, born between 1965 and 1979, and Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2012). The edges of all of these cohorts are fuzzy, and given that the Boomer and Millennial generations span nearly two decades apiece, there are experiences and cultural markers particular to older Boomers versus younger ones, and ditto older versus younger Millennials. Generalizing about any age group is tricky, since virtually nothing, apart from being born within a particular a set of years, is true of *all* Boomers or *all* Millennials. No statement in this book about Boomers generally, or statistic about Boomers on average, is meant to apply to every Boomer individually. It's particularly dicey to generalize about Boomer politics, given that Boomers are the most politically polarized generation in America, cleaved right down the middle of the liberal/conservative

divide, and with more or less equal numbers hewing to the left and the right. Not so for Millennials, who are, as a whole, significantly more liberal.

But American Boomers and Millennials alike grew up against particular political and social backdrops. Both generations are unique, and their collective experiences are distinct. And so while generational groupings are imperfect, they are nonetheless important if we want to understand the arc of history, and what we collectively inherit.

I'm an "older Millennial," a child of Boomer parents. One September day in my first month as a college student, I was stirred awake by a low rumble I first thought was a garbage truck; it was an airplane headed for the Twin Towers, just two miles from my dorm. The first day of my first full-time job as a lawyer just out of school was September 15, 2008: the day Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy, still the largest in American history, and sent the entire economy tumbling down.

The 2008 financial collapse was spectacular. Older Millennials were just entering the workforce and suffered some of the downturn's hardest blows. Many of us lost our jobs; many others couldn't get jobs to begin with. Our health suffered. Our student loan debt accrued. We took earnings losses from which we still have not recovered. We might never fully come back.

For many Millennials, there is a feeling of failure as we compare the leaps we saw our parents make to our own lives, which feel like the equivalent of trying to walk up the down escalator.

When my parents were my age, they were married and raising two children and a golden retriever in a home they owned. My father paid his way through law school by working in the Chicago steel mills and living at home. My mother got a nursing degree without carrying a dime of student loan debt. Together, they supported a family in middle-class comfort on the salaries of a nurse and a public defender. We were far from rich, but we

had a house in a neighborhood with good schools, two cars, annual vacations to places like Disneyland and the Grand Canyon, the ability to pay for sports uniforms and music lessons, and a college fund on top of that.

That is not what my life looks like.

I have a law degree like my dad, but it came with six-figure debt. I got married at thirty-four, before most of my close friends, and live with my husband and two cats in an apartment that costs close to half of each of our monthly take-home pay. (My husband and I own a condo in another city, the down payment for which I would have never been able to afford on my own.) I have very little saved for retirement, and largely live freelance paycheck to freelance paycheck. We don't have kids. That's partly because we don't know if we want them, partly because we aren't sure it's ethical to bring them into a world increasingly devastated by climate change, and partly because we couldn't afford them without radically changing our lives.

But it's not all bleak. I'm exceptionally lucky to have what I consider a great life, and as a white Millennial raised in the middle class, I'm a lot more fortunate than much of my generation. My parents sought to give my sister and me opportunities they never had, and we have taken them. The differences between our lives and our parents' are partly about economics, policy, and opportunity, and partly about values—not in the values we hold, which are similar, but in the values we live.

But it seems unlikely that I will ever do “better” than my parents—just as it seems unlikely I'll be able to rely on programs like Social Security and Medicare as I age into retirement. Millions of Millennials are in the same boat. And while we don't blame our individual parents—not my Boomer!—we do blame their cohort. In one 2018 poll, more than half of Millennials said that Baby Boomers made things worse for our generation; only 13 percent of us said Boomers made things better.

Nor do things seem to be *getting* better. Already on shaky ground, younger Millennials were at the dawn of their working lives and older Millennials were entering our prime earning years when we were slammed again, this time by a pandemic that plunged the economy into a recession that many fear could rival the Great Depression. As I make final edits on this book, close to 40 million Americans have lost their jobs and applied for unemployment benefits; economists predict that 47 million could be furloughed or laid off, and close to one in three working-age Americans could end up out of a job, before this book hits the shelves. Many Millennial women with kids are suddenly in charge of full-time childcare and homeschooling in addition to work for pay, while their supposedly egalitarian male partners put their own paid work first. When this crisis ends, those same mothers will inevitably be seen as less dedicated and less productive, which, especially in a downturn, puts their continued employment at risk. Women's earnings

also typically begin to level off when we're in our midthirties and peak earlier than men's, all of which means that Millennial women may get pummeled particularly hard in the coronavirus's economic aftershocks.

There's already some evidence that Millennials, and particularly black and Hispanic Millennials, will bear the brunt of the 2020 economic crisis. A *Washington Post* analysis found that in March and April 2020, Millennial employment decreased by 16 percent, while Gen X and Baby Boomer employment dropped by 12 and 13 percent, respectively. In 2019, Millennials had surpassed Gen Xers as the largest segment of the full-time workforce. But Millennials' 2020 job losses have been so extreme that those gains are projected to reverse. An April 2020 survey from Data for Progress showed that more than half of voters under forty-five—a group that is majority Millennial—said they had already lost their job, been put on leave, or seen their hours scaled back, and black Americans were worse off than whites. Older

voters—those over the age of forty-five, so mostly Boomers and Gen Xers—are faring better: Only about a quarter of them said they've seen their jobs impacted. Three-quarters of them said nothing has changed and they don't expect it to.

There is no way to fully comprehend the insecurity of Millennial life without putting race at the center of the story. Millennials are the most racially diverse adult generation in American history, and Gen Zers—some of them still children—are more diverse still. But centuries of racist policies, laws, and norms have cut black and brown people out of the American dream. As Millennials hit adulthood, the numbers bear out all the ways in which long-fermenting racial injustices have exploded into generation-wide devastation, leaving our cohort poor, insecurely housed, physically ill, and underemployed, despite the fact that we are also the most educated adults in American history. Millennials' financial lives have been stymied by the slowest economic

growth any American generation has ever seen, while opportunities for Millennials of color have been further constrained by widespread incarceration, the methodical thwarting of generational wealth-building, and systemic discrimination in hiring and pay. Even though our generation is less white, the racial wealth gap has grown wider—there are proportionately fewer white people, but they hold proportionately more wealth. We are the grandchildren of the civil rights movement, and yet money and power remain concentrated in white hands.

When George Floyd, an unarmed black man in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Breonna Taylor, a black emergency medical technician in Louisville, Kentucky, were killed by police in the spring of 2020, rage and righteousness boiled over. Millions of people took to the streets in the midst of a pandemic, to protest police abuses and murders of black men and women. The police reacted by rampaging: walloping protesters with billy clubs, firing tear gas and rubber bullets into peace-

ful crowds, and attacking and arresting journalists. The protests were first and foremost about ending police violence against African Americans. But a closer look at the crowds in any of hundreds of American cities and towns revealed a movement dominated by young people. The demands of many of the protesters, moreover, reflected generational as well as racial neglect. “Defund the police,” came one rallying cry, so that governments can instead invest in communities of color: redirecting public dollars to schools, health care, job opportunities, safe and secure housing, and neighborhoods cleaned of pollutants and toxins. “Ultimately,” Boomer president Barack Obama wrote in the midst of the demonstrations, “it’s going to be up to a new generation of activists to shape strategies that best fit the times.”

The question is whether that new generation will be able to wrest power from the old one. As we plunge into a second recession, Boomers are, on the whole, better-off than those of us under forty. They’re also the ones

designing the recovery packages and bailout plans. As young people march for racial justice and community investment, it's Boomers, who fill a majority of the seats in Congress, on the Supreme Court, and in state legislatures, who maintain disproportionate power in determining the political response. Millennials and Gen Zers are watching this all unfold and realizing that, again, our futures may be mortgaged so that the wealthiest Baby Boomers can continue to live large.

I'm not exactly the voice of my generation, even if I am part of a Millennial demographic (white, heterosexual, highly credentialed, city-dwelling) that is over-represented in media and entertainment. But I am a journalist (and a person with eyes and ears). What I see around me, even from a privileged perch, and what I've heard again and again in reporting this book, is that Millennials have faced unique hardships that set our generation apart. We're only now starting to grasp the degree to which we have gotten screwed. And we're respond-

ing with desperation and sometimes anger. That's where "OK Boomer" comes from: it's a final, frustrated dismissal from people suffering years of political and economic neglect.

Generational warfare is nothing new. When today's Boomers were college-aged hippies, they were warning each other not to trust anyone over thirty. Part of Millennial-Boomer tension is simply the usual cycle of change, with the young resenting their elders and the elders complaining about kids these days. The kids were beatniks before they were hippies before they were snowflakes. Soon enough, Millennials will be shaking our fists at the youngsters, demanding they get off our environmentally friendly succulent-speckled rock lawns.

What's different now, though, is that there is a moneyed system interested in sowing generational discord and stoking fear. Call it the Boomer Anxiety Industrial Complex. It's a largely right-wing machine targeted at older Americans, encouraging

a nearly manic obsession with the alleged wrongdoings of younger, more liberal people. Shocking stories about college students encroaching on free speech are a staple. So are more pedestrian narratives about college students being too sensitive, too emotional, or too “politically correct.” This didn’t start with Millennials; the seeds of the anti-PC/“college students versus free speech” propaganda were planted in the nineties, part of a backlash against Bill Clinton, the first Boomer president.

Today, Fox News is the primary anti-Millennial television outlet, but there’s also generationally tailored content on websites like Breitbart and Townhall, and hackneyed memes that circulate among the over-fifty set on Facebook and Twitter. Boomers are more likely to watch Fox News than almost any other network, and close to half of them told Pew that in the previous week, they’d gotten political news from Fox.

That’s bad news. Researchers and media scholars alike have pointed out that Fox has long been profoundly and

intentionally biased in favor of conservative causes. As part of this right-wing political project, the higher-ups at Fox have also learned that nothing fires up their Boomer audience like fear: fear of immigrants, fear of Islamic extremism, fear of a changing world, and even fear of mainstream media sources. As one character in the movie *Bombshell* put it, “You have to adopt the mentality of an Irish street cop. The world is a bad place. People are lazy morons. Minorities are criminals. Sex is sick but interesting. Ask yourself, ‘What would scare my grandmother, or piss off my grandfather?’ And that’s a Fox story.”

This is odd, because Boomers also lay claim to everything from the civil rights movement to second-wave feminism to antiwar activism to some of the best music America has ever produced. And it’s not just aging lefties who say Boomers were the OG activists, protesters, and social justice warriors; even the conservatives of Fox claim to be anti-racist and celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. (whose legacy

they have distorted beyond recognition, casting the civil rights icon as apolitical, and Donald Trump as his ideological heir). Boomers on the left and the right cast their early adult years as a period of idealism and progress. They think of themselves as having improved the world.

A few Boomers certainly did, but overall, the Boomer generation brought us a rapid national shift away from the ideals of gender equality, racial justice, and pacifism. Perhaps this generation-wide self-delusion helps explain why Boomers have such a casual relationship with the truth. In a study of “prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook,” researchers from New York University and Princeton found that Americans over sixty-five share false or misleading content at seven times the rate of younger ones, regardless of ideology.

Boomers, in other words, take credit for twentieth-century social progress while binge-watching Fox News and disseminating conspiracy theories on

Facebook (where algorithms feed them more and more of the same). According to a Nielsen publication aimed at media advertisers, “The aging brain likes repetitions—and will believe information that is familiar to be true.” This is Fox’s persuasion strategy: repeated themes that, because of said repetition, begin to feel spot-on.

Here’s a smattering of what Fox News viewers and readers of FoxNews.com have heard from anchors, contributors, and guests: “Millennials are abandoning religion for good”; “Millennials clean their bathrooms less frequently than other age groups”; “Most Americans think Millennials are selfish and entitled”; “Most Millennials are intimidated by plants”; “The Millennial generation is going to be the first generation that doesn’t do anything”; “Millennials are lazy, they have a lack of drive”; Millennials are “Easily offended cocoon-dwellers”; “Millennials, yes, they are officially the most narcissistic generation”; “Are Millennials to blame for all of the world’s problems?” “Are Millennials going god-

less?"; "Halloween is ruined and it's all thanks to Millennials"; "In 2017, the average terrorist is a Millennial"; Millennials are "psychotic"; and "They're the most pampered, ignorant—biggest crybabies I've ever seen."

The message: Millennials are a threat to the American way of life.

The target: Boomers. Keeping them aggrieved, annoyed, and afraid is good for business.

The result: a ginned-up generation war.

This doesn't just help keep conservatives in power; it enables Boomers to avoid taking responsibility for the world they're leaving their children. A true reckoning with the consequences of Boomer policies and decisions casts a harsh light on the children of the Greatest Generation. It reveals how few of the Boomers' own ideals they managed to live up to. And, hopefully, it will inspire the many well-meaning Boomers to do something before it's too late.

This book is that reckoning. It is also a peace offering to those Boomers who

are worried about the world they're leaving their children. But peace deals aren't brokered with platitudes. We won't reconcile this generational divide or move beyond it if we don't take a hard and sometimes uncomfortable look at what caused it. OK, Boomer—are you ready to talk?