
Escaping Into Adulthood

Writing about America in the 1950s in *Commentary* (Sept. 1993), essayist Joseph Epstein notes that young people then were eager to leave youth behind.

We of the '50s were not rebels, with or without a cause (a damn poor '50s movie, Rebel Without A Cause, by the way). To be a rebel, to be in revolt, implied being locked into youthfulness. Far from wishing to stay young, we who were young in the '50s were eager to grow up. Growing up meant growing into freedom, which was the name of our desire.

I am reminded here of the English poet Philip Larkin's saying that his religious sympathies first began to wane when he discovered that in the Christian version of heaven one would become as a little child again. Staying a child was not what Larkin, or my friends and I in the '50s, had in mind at all. Like Larkin, we wanted "money, keys, wal-

let, letters, books, long-playing records, drinks, the opposite sex, and other solaces of adulthood." Everything in the culture of the '50s provoked one to grow up. ("Oh, grow up," sisters would say to troublesome younger brothers.) The ideal, in the movies and in life, was adulthood.

In the '50s, one was encouraged to be adult and yet one believed in progress and hence in the future. Since the '60s, one has been encouraged to remain young for as long as possible, and yet not many people believe in progress and the future seems terrifying. This has all the makings of a paradox, until one realizes that the difference between the two cultural injunctions is that the first comports with biological reality and the second does not. Since one cannot really hope to stay young for long, the future brings with it nothing so inexorably as the prospect of growing old, which is to say, the prospect of certain defeat.

like cattle." In Williamsburg, Virginia, the black slaves had to do "their master's work, men and women, young and old," in the cotton fields "without any clothes on." White Virginians told Flohr that clothing the slaves "would cost too much . . . and the slaves were not worth that much." Unlike many of his military superiors, Flohr did not regard the harsh treatment as necessary, nor did he echo the usual claim that the slaves were lazy, ungrateful, and given to stealing. Slavery, he declared, was unchristian and "completely against human nature."

Flohr's view of the New World's "savages" was not so very different from the views of other Europeans. He wrote sympathetically of some Indian customs and practices but also reported, inaccurately, that the Iroquois sacrificed some of their own people to their gods.

Flohr's journal says nothing about the ideals of liberty or the pursuit of happiness, but he found enough to like in America that, after bouncing around a bit—and witnessing the execution of Louis XVI in 1793—he returned. He became a Lutheran minister in Virginia and lived there until his death in 1826.

A New Paternalism?

"In Loco Parentis: Helping Children When Families Fail Them" by James Q. Wilson, in *The Brookings Review* (Fall 1993), Brookings Institution, 1775 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Policy wonks may debate what is behind the rise of America's urban underclass, but ordinary folks think they know. The criminals and chronically poor people who occupy society's lower depths, they say, lack vital attitudes and character traits. Wilson, a political scientist at the University of California at Los Angeles, tends to agree. The problem is that individuals acquire these traits—such as self-control and the ability to delay gratification—from their families, and even policy wonks do not know what to do if, as is increasingly the case, the family falls apart or falls down on the job of inculcating them.

Government efforts to compensate have not yielded encouraging results, Wilson observes. As part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, for example, the Pentagon in 1966 launched Project 100,000 to try to improve the lives of a group of "low aptitude" recruits. Al-

though most of these young men later said that the experience was good for them, researchers found that these veterans were worse off in terms of employment status, educational achievement, and income than nonveterans from similar backgrounds. Other troubled young men, admitted to the military between 1976 and 1980, were later found to be no better off than comparable nonveterans.

Results from early-childhood intervention programs are a little more encouraging but still inconclusive, Wilson says. Most optimism about Head Start, for example, derives from the modest success of a single model preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan. In another somewhat encouraging experiment, the federal Infant Health

and Development Program intervened in the lives of 1,000 prematurely born children, sponsoring home visits by counselors and special classes. After three years, the youngsters had higher IQs and fewer behavioral problems than others born prematurely.

The lesson of these scattered experiences seems to be that intervention works best when it is deep and long-lasting. Which leads Wilson to a radical proposal: Why not provide public subsidies to allow the poor to send their children to public or private boarding schools? The well-to-do have always had this option for the upbringing of their children, he argues, and it would be in society's interest to extend it to the poor as well.

PRESS & MEDIA

Are the Media Obsolete?

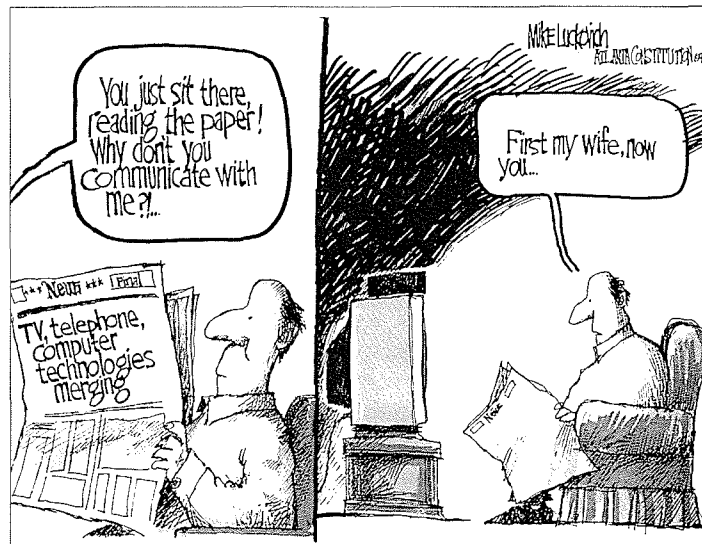
"The Mediasaurus" by Michael Crichton, in *Wired* (Sept.-Oct. 1993), 544 2nd St., San Francisco, Calif. 94107-1427.

Michael Crichton, author of *Jurassic Park* (1990) and other novels, should recognize a dinosaur when he sees one, and he thinks he has one in view. "To my mind, it is likely that what we now understand as the mass media will be gone within 10 years. Vanished, without a trace," he declares.

Since the American Revolution, the news media have enjoyed a monopoly over information, Crichton writes. "They have treated information the way John D. Rockefeller treated oil—as a commodity, in which the distribution network, rather than product quality, is of primary importance." A complacent industry has failed to recognize that technological advancement has forever altered the nature

of its product, information.

With technological tools such as C-SPAN, e-mail, and computer networks, today's consumer has direct access to high-quality information of personal or professional interest, and demand for such access is growing rap-



The coming world in which (if Crichton is right) newspapers and other mass media will be obsolete may be less than an information paradise.