

## CHAPTER 2

# Boomers — Act Two

*I lift my voice aloud,  
make Mantra of American language now,  
I here declare the end of the War!  
Ancient days' Illusion!  
and pronounce words beginning my own millennium.*  
— Allen Ginsberg, “Wichita Vortex Sutra”

When I wrote *The Making of a Counter Culture* in 1969, I was as fascinated with the political ebullience of college-aged, and even high-school-aged, youth as the rest of the world around me — the *young demographic*, as the marketing industry would soon refer to them. The rising influence of teens and twenty-somethings in the United States and Europe was the big story of that decade and the next. It was as if a war-weary parental generation was looking to its children to plant the ruined world with flowers. Everything from hair styles to social ideology seemed to be falling under the sway of the exuberant young. But what middle-class parents saw happening among their progeny as they reached their high school and college years was not encouraging. It was not satisfaction, and it was not gratitude. The prevailing intellectual style of the time on campus and in the coffeehouses was an existential angst that asked whether life was worth living — or was it an exercise in absurdity: pushing the rock up the hill only to see it roll back down? There was a good deal of such melancholia among the early Beats of the postwar

period, a surly life-is-a-lousy-drag sullenness that seemed out of keeping with their country's recent good fortune. Why were such gestures of disaffiliation catching on with the young? What place did morbid discontent have in prospering America? Was this not the land of limitless discretionary income, where not a single bomb had dropped and where nobody was going hungry? As mothers and fathers would soon learn: that was not going to be good enough. A dark disquiet was brewing in their pampered children.

The American version of Sartre and Camus might have been lightweight and skewed toward adolescence, but the inarticulate angst of Holden Caulfield, the rebellious young hero of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, had a quality that formal philosophy rarely achieves. Embodied in the experience of a teenage runaway, Holden's clear-eyed contempt for the adult world could speak to a larger and younger public. One of the most widely assigned high school texts of the 1950s, the novel, both in its wistfulness and in its premature cynicism, overlapped with the impulsive need of the young to make their own life. Norman Mailer, writing in 1959, shrewdly recognized that explosive connection early on in the period. For Mailer, the American existentialist was the *hipster*. The hipsters were "white Negroes," as Mailer put it, "a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts...an elite with the potential ruthlessness of an elite, and a language most adolescents can understand instinctively, for the hipster's intense view of existence matches their experience and their desire to rebel."<sup>1</sup>

A college instructor at the time, just beginning my teaching career, I recall how astonished I was to see the change that came over my students through the early 1960s. It was as if someone had pushed a button, and within a few short years the universities were turned upside down. The students I had before me were nothing like the college population I remembered from

my own undergraduate experience. Just to set a time line: when I arrived on campus as a freshman, World War II vets on the GI Bill were finishing up on their post-docs and exploring the job market. Many were already married and raising families; they were on their way into lucrative careers as doctors, lawyers, weapons engineers, marketing analysts, and junior executives. My postwar years at UCLA were lived out under the shadow of Senator Joseph McCarthy's reign of terror. In that period, as the pressures of the Cold War set in, it took courage simply to sign a petition or attend a political rally. But now, as I entered my teaching career, seemingly overnight students were talking revolution and behaving as if they were willing to defy all official rules and parental conventions. Many of the brightest were vanishing from the campus, walking out on their parents' expectations in search of some better alternative.

In the United States, the baby boom was the largest population bulge in the nation's history — too large a number to be fairly contained either then or now by any simple generalization. As one might expect, this young demographic exhibited a spectrum of values and choices. Most of these babies would grow up to follow in their parents' footsteps. They would be as patriotic, as pious, as law-abiding, and as complacent about the inherited ideals of their society as their parents and grandparents before them. But a sizeable number — nobody can say how many, but enough to make for good-sized rallies, marches, and rock concerts — would find reasons to voice significant discomfort with just about everything in sight: education, family, foreign policy, national priorities, middle-class conformity, corporate misconduct, race relations, gender identities, the work ethic, sexual mores. "Young people speakin' their mind/Gettin' so much resistance from behind." At times they seemed to be acting out Marlon Brando's line from the 1954 film *The Wild One*. Asked what he is rebelling against, Brando, playing a surly, leather-clad biker, answers, "What have you got?"

I realized at the time that the wild ones among my students were a minority of their generation. In fact, the disaffiliated were a minority of a minority. The college-aged population might have been larger than ever before, but it was still a minority of the nation — and of the world — as a whole. And even among those who showed up at the universities, only a minority participated in the protest politics of the time. But however small their numbers, they knew how to draw attention, and not simply by their boisterousness. The quality of the issues they were raising demanded a response. They had drawn a bead on the phoniness and hypocrisy of their society, on its greed and injustice and moral numbness. *Generation* is the most unwieldy of social categories, little better than the people who happen to be lined up together at a bus stop. Yet, almost of necessity, we do isolate eras, movements, and groups out of the steady and seamless flow of time and give them names, faces, identities. The parents of the boomers have been called *the greatest generation*, but not everybody went to war in the 1940s or suffered the worst trials of the Great Depression in the 1930s. We speak of the *flaming youth* of the 1920s, but that term did not describe more than a small minority of boisterous college kids, then an even smaller fraction of the total population. How many young women of that era would claim they were flappers, how many young men habituated speakeasies? The style of a generation is not a matter of statistics but of innovation. Historians, always on the lookout for the novel and flamboyant, are often guilty of overlooking the mainstream, the average, the ordinary — perhaps because nothing interesting is happening there. Changes in the cultural taste and moral awareness of society always begin in the lives of a minority, and that minority may become the soul of a generation.

Perhaps I would have viewed the youthful disaffiliation of the time differently, and probably with less hope of rapid social change, if I could have foreseen how many members of the younger generation would eventually wind up as cultural con-

servatives or evangelical Christians, how many would settle for lucrative business careers, how many would find the thrill of a lifetime at a NASCAR rally. In all the generalizations and high hopes I offer here, I have tried to remember that George W. Bush, Karl Rove, and Newt Gingrich qualify as boomers — as do many architects of the Iraq war. So were the piratical traders at Enron and World Com. Boomers have been the main market for SUV gas-guzzlers and the most competitive parents in history when it comes to getting their children into the best schools. But that does not change my assessment of the dissent I saw around me through the 1960s and 1970s. That period will be remembered in the history books as a time of significant political unrest, as much so in the United States as the years of the Progressive movement at the turn of the 20th century or the New Deal of the 1930s. The protestors might have been young and at times frivolously high-spirited, but the issues they addressed were weighty. More importantly for the years to come, many of the ideas they championed are as bright and promising today as they were in the days of Woodstock.

The hopes I invested in the protest of that period had much to do with my own situation. I was at that time developing serious reservations about the basic sanity and sustainability of urban-industrial culture. I cannot say where these reservations came from, certainly not from my very conventional, working-class, Catholic background. Maybe dissent was in the air and I caught a good, strong case of it, especially after I settled in the San Francisco Bay Area. After all, the world was living (as it still does, though we assume with a bit less urgency) under the threat of thermonuclear annihilation. What clearer sign could there be that our technology was rapidly running away with us, setting mindless priorities that lacked all prudence? Under pressure of the anti-communist mania which had become the total foreign policy of the United States, the scale of our institutions, both governmental and private, was overwhelming any meaningful

democratic control. The power of governing elites—the military-industrial complex—was growing, unchecked, by the year. The social reality that we were expected to adapt to—an unsavory mix of marketing lies, mysteries of state, and technocratic obsessions—was becoming ever more claustrophobic.

It was the surrealistic incongruity of it all, the sheer crazy-making inanity of business and politics as usual, that was most troubling. I had spent a good deal of undergraduate time imbibing existential negativity, bemoaning the bad faith and moral treachery of humanity and expecting the worst from those who controlled the bomb; perhaps that had deepened my sensitivity to the absurd. And now I found it all around me. The era that brought us the theater of the absurd also brought us the society of the absurd. All Mort Sahl had to do to produce mass hilarity was to stand in Sproul Plaza in Berkeley and read the newspapers. Following a war that was fought against the ugliest of racist ideologies, racism persisted. In the midst of the unprecedented affluence that followed the war, poverty persisted. In the ethos of the Cold War, the very civil liberties that supposedly set us apart from fascist and communist totalitarianism were being undermined by right-wing demagogues. With more knowledge at our fingertips than any society had ever enjoyed, we were drowning in duplicity and mystification. Though technology had given us more power over nature than humanity had ever enjoyed, it was becoming frighteningly clear that we were doing the planet more harm than good. DDT was being sprayed in the open air of public parks and residential neighborhoods across the country. Television bubbled over the delights of limitless consumption (this was, after all, the era that invented the credit card), but in our schools, children were learning to duck and cover when they saw the sky catch fire.

Has there ever been such a heady mixture of social contradiction and moral ambiguity? Had any previous generation ever faced a larger agenda of weighty issues? The very ideals for

which revolutionaries of the past had fought were being brought under critical scrutiny. Radical spirits had long embraced science as the heart and soul of enlightenment; they had seized upon technology as the secret of universal prosperity; they had turned *progress* into a secular religion. But here I was, wondering what difference it made who owned or controlled the means of production if those very means had become a Frankenstein monster over which leaders had less and less control.

Where to look for a sane alternative? At the time, my own thoughts were reaching back to the origins of industrial society, to the great Romantic movement that had pitted the poets and philosophers of the later 18th century against the momentum of modern history. I believed that Blake and Shelley, Goethe and Wordsworth had more to teach us about life and the world than the experts at the RAND Corporation. The young Romantics of that distant time were the first to rail against the gargantuan growth of cities, the concentration of power in ever fewer hands, the rape of nature that was then just beginning, and above all against the dominance of a narrow, desiccated form of rationality that purported to be master of all that it observed — “Single Vision,” as William Blake called it. So it was that I quoted Blake as the epigraph for *The Making of a Counter Culture*: “Art Degraded, Imagination Denied, War Governed the Nations.” Consciousness was at the core of the Romantic political style — as it was once again among the young protesters of the 1960s. As zany as their politics might sometimes seem, it struck me that they had it right: The materialistic obsessions and blinkered consciousness that dominated both the capitalist west and the Marxist east were corrupting our souls. More than we needed new laws and new programs, more than we needed a change in governance, we needed a new quality of experience, something we would have to learn from artists and visionaries rather than politicians. We needed a culture that would *counter* the reality principle that ruled our souls.

The forces of youthful dissent achieved a good deal in just a few years' time between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. They succeeded in stopping a disastrous war in Vietnam and in bringing down a crooked and deceitful president. They championed new initiatives for equality and justice: a women's movement and a gay liberation movement to take their place alongside movements for racial justice. They planted the ideal of multiculturalism squarely in the mainstream. They transformed the sexual morality of their society and deepened our awareness of the irrational forces that lurk in the depths of the psyche. And, not least of all, they launched an environmental movement to address the future of the planet. All to the good. Even so, by the mid-1970s, it became clear that much would remain undone. The magnitude of the countercultural changes some had sought was too great. That would require more thought, more strategic planning, more maturity than a single generation still in its youth could manage. Then, as the younger generation moved out into the world to seek careers and form families, their dissenting energy faded. The youthful *élan* that had offered us these new beginnings was passing. Some called it *the big chill*. And by the 1980s, a well-financed and well-generated conservative backlash was on the scene, working to restore the "economic royalists" of corporate America (as Franklin Roosevelt had called them as far back as the mid-1930s) to their place of privilege and to build an even bigger warfare state. Intellect, once the monopoly of the left, began to gravitate to new, right-wing think tanks. Competitive individualism and free-market orthodoxy, the discredited worldview of the 1890s, suddenly reappeared as hot new ideas. The future, it seemed, had lost its utopian luster.

### Life Beyond the Young Demographic

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there was heated debate about the intellectual and ethical significance of youthful protest. The

media fed avidly on the antics of the young, while many pundits dismissed all they saw as ephemeral, narcissistic posturing. Conservatives were particularly dismayed at what they saw unfolding. Eventually, in a grand judgmental summation entitled *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom, a major neo-conservative mentor, would look back in contempt on the entire, turbulent era, blasting it as a betrayal of absolute values. Multiculturalism, Bloom believed, was a fatuous offense to the glories of western civilization; feminism was an absurd attack upon the natural order of the family and the biology of gender relations; the language and behavior of young dissenters were uncivil and subintellectual; their lenient, liberal professors were guilty of a poisonous, anything-goes permissiveness. Bloom could see nothing redeeming in the “histrionic morality” of the 1960s. A “period of dogmatic answers and trivial tracts,” it was “an exercise in egalitarian self-satisfaction.” For the universities, it was a period of “unmitigated disaster,” in which pusillanimous and guilt-ridden academics, instead of cracking down on bad taste and bad thinking, encouraged the muddled self-indulgence of students who were little more than a mindless “rabble.” Above all, it was the vulgarity of the era that offended him, the lack of respect for excellence and the great creative achievements of the western heritage. The result, he felt, was a corrosive cultural relativism that “succeeds in destroying the western world’s universal or intellectually imperialistic claims, leaving it to be just another culture.” For Bloom, the concept of *lifestyle* sums up the sins of the era. “‘Lifestyle’ justifies any way of life, as does ‘value’ any opinion.... Lifestyle was first popularized here to describe and make acceptable the lives of people who do attractive things that are frowned upon by society. It was identical to counter culture.... Counterculture, of course, enjoyed the dignity attaching to culture, and was intended as a reproach to the bourgeois excuse for a culture we see around us. What actually goes on in a

counter culture or a lifestyle — whether it is ennobling or debasing — makes no difference.... Whatever you are, whoever you are, is the good.”<sup>2</sup>

Strong words from a learned man. Bloom could wield the authority of great minds with self-assured dexterity — Plato, Locke, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Hegel. He brought these to bear with impressive effect in his biting critique of youthful dissent. And it must be granted that the angry irreverence of the time, as expressed in slogans, posters, graffiti, and street theater, does not stand up well against the measured words of intellectual giants. But what conclusion would Bloom have reached if he had leveled the same erudite criticism at those on the commanding heights of society — the Pentagon warlords, the RAND Corporation strategists, the “best and the brightest” in the West Wing, the corporate beneficiaries of the military-industrial complex, all those whose decisions enforced the chauvinism, the racism, and social injustice at which the dissent of the 1960s was aimed? Would he also have awarded them a failing grade for their violations of reason and decency — or would he have given them a gentleman’s C?

Bloom, a committed conservative, was not alone in finding the 1960s an elusive critical target. Though the counter culture was rebellious enough to offend the political right, it was not ideologically rigorous enough to please the left. Many old-line lefties were as harshly dismissive as Reagan right-wingers. Even those who were in the thick of things still had a hard time making up their minds. In a 2006 interview, Country Joe McDonald, whose “Fixin’ to Die Rag” was the anti-war anthem of the period sung to crowds that numbered thousands, confessed that he had no idea what all the demonstrations accomplished — if anything. “There was a lot of bull thrown around about revolution and a lot of drug taking and sex happening,” he observed. But he wondered if it made “much of a difference.” Other veterans of the period found the radical politics of the time so mis-

conceived that they made an about-face and turned staunchly conservative. Peter Collier, an editor of *Ramparts* in the 1960s, and David Horowitz, once a fiery New Leftist, made that transition. The title of their 1989 book, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About The Sixties*, captures their change of heart. The counter culture, so Collier and Horowitz concluded, was little more than “an Oedipal revolt,” an outburst by adolescents “who never grew up politically.”

Now, looking back, I think a lot of what has been said pro and con about the 1960s — a calendar decade that has assumed a personality of its own — was foolishly overwrought. The scene was chaotic, a lot of people doing a lot of things — some of it smart, some of it witless, some of it astute, some of it delusionary — but none of it officially initiated or under central control. And that as much as anything else was worrisome to people in high places. The mandarins of corporate America were being mocked by the children of prosperity and the values of the sacred marketplace rejected — but not in the name of any familiar ideological tradition. The attack was a disconcertingly playful con-fabulation with anarchist social theory, voluntary primitivism, Zen-Taoist mysticism, occult lore, Tolkienesque fairy tales, with all of it fueled by a randy, adolescent prankishness. Conservatives especially were troubled by the brashness and disorder of the time. Many of those who would later flock to the Reagan backlash — horrified evangelicals, Young Americans for Freedom with their high respect for God and country, neoconservatives nursing visions of a worldwide Pax Americana — probably still carry troubling memories of the sexual openness and disrespectful rhetoric they saw around them, and perhaps regret they missed out on the fun and games when they had the chance. If one cares to lint-pick, there was plenty to denigrate. There was certainly no lack of ideological extremists, loud-mouthed bullies, radical poseurs, and devious opportunists moving through the ranks of the protest movement. Bloom, for example, drew a

great deal of his spleen from a few obnoxious activists he had to deal with and some distasteful incidents he lived through on his campus. He was especially offended by the uppitiness of black power leaders and even more so by the insolence of militant feminists, who, he felt, failed to appreciate the chivalric side of machismo and seemed to have no idea why God had endowed them with a womb.

Yet self-righteous vituperation and strident anger were hardly the only ingredients in the bubbling political stew of the times. The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society is as fine a manifesto as any ever written, and the authors on whom young dissenters drew — C. Wright Mills, Paul Goodman, Noam Chomsky, Jacques Ellul, E.F. Schumacher, Herbert Marcuse — were hardly lightweights. Admittedly, there were new modes of expression, especially the rock music of the period, that were troublingly unfamiliar to the cultural mainstream, but, given the chance, they could be persuasively incisive. Works such as Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (especially Terry Southern's mordant screenplay) and Allen Ginsberg's "Wichita Vortex Sutra" brilliantly capture the craziness in high places (both east and west) that was threatening the world with thermonuclear devastation. Despite its cool demeanor and consoling euphemisms, the "mad rationality" (to use Lewis Mumford's phrase) that dominated postwar politics was a far greater offense to civilized values than the fear and fury in the streets. That is what one must listen for in the whirling words of Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Talking Blues," once so suspiciously jarring that disk jockeys would not put it on the air. Even when the poetry and lyrics of the time were awkward or just plain bad, they voiced a desperate frustration. The very quality I most admired in the dissenting politics of that period — its lack of monolithic organization, the absence of heavy leadership, the spontaneity and improvisational imagination that invited everybody to speak their piece — made it impossible to reach a firm

conclusion about occasional outbursts of misconduct. Making evaluations of a social phenomenon as messy as *The 1960s* is like trying to make a single, unqualified judgment about the Protestant Reformation or the French Revolution that neatly balances the moral grandeur against the lamentable extremes. That is certainly more than I can do. That was why, in writing on the period, I limited myself to cheering on a few prominent ideas and the people who championed them. But inevitably that carried over into a permissiveness on my part that other commentators could not accept.

Now what I most regret overlooking in my critique of the 1960s is an obvious demographic fact that has remained subliminal until recently. Like all the rest of us, boomers grow old. There is more to this generation than what it did between the ages of 18 and 24; it did not evaporate before reaching the age of 30. No generation deserves to be judged before it has run its course. Given time, a big younger generation becomes a big older generation. Maybe we overlooked that fact because of the infatuation with youth that boomers ushered into history. When they were young, boomers had the attention of the world, so much so that when they stopped being young, it was as if they vanished in a puff of smoke. *Old boomer* was a contradiction in terms. Who could imagine Bob Dylan going gray or Mick Jagger getting wrinkled? But to dismiss those who have stopped being the younger generation is to subscribe to the very obsession with youth that boomers themselves created — with the help of the adoring media and an opportunistic marketing industry.

Yet, if anything, a big generation takes on more cultural influence with age; in its senior years, it brings a hard-won maturity to its politics. It also finds its way to values that lie beyond the immediate demands of family and career. In memory, it carries forward what it once was and finds time to ponder its place in history. As a Gray Panther leader of the 1960s once said, “Being retired is like being back on the campus,” which is at least

a chance to take stock and review. What comes of that review can be wisdom, and, given the size of the demographic, the wisdom of elders may have more power to change the world than the passion of youth. Maybe, in the light of its peculiar historical experience, every older generation has been different from those that came before. But there is no question that this older generation of boomers, born into an era of unprecedented affluence and apocalyptic anxiety in the wake of the worst war and the worst economic debacle of modern times, will be different enough to change the bad habits of the corporate and military elite who have done such a remarkable job of reconstituting themselves over the last generation.

Nothing distinguishes the baby-boom generation more than its capacity for holding center stage. What would one expect of so large a generation? Its slightest whim, whether in the marketplace or in the voting booth, was bound to have major social implications. So, too, the ideals that shaped its most important decisions in life. Boomers grew up being scrutinized and analyzed as if they possessed some privileged knowledge of the future, something their parents could not see or understand. The counter culture played upon that attribution. Hence, the fascination with code words, song lyrics that could not be heard over the roar of the amplifiers, psychedelic fonts that were nearly illegible. As a result, they got into the habit of smug self-assertion. And too often they were taken at their own narcissistically high evaluation. In their teens and twenties, large numbers of boomers opted to identify themselves as champions of dissent and cultural innovators. Saving the world is a heavy assignment for the young to take on, but boomers at least enjoyed an inspiring precedent: the rebellious exuberance of youthful generations past. They were not the first younger generation to assign themselves an idealistic role; there had been young revolutionaries and red-diaper babies before them. In the United States, at the end of the 19th century, Progressivism was a movement

of the young, mainly the young professionals who were graduating from the new land-grant universities. During the days of the New Deal, there were young communists and Trotskyites on many university campuses. The association of youth with radical change has been with us since the days of the French Revolution when the entire western world seemed to be at the threshold of a new era which only the young could understand. It was the revolutionary Year One. The young William Wordsworth, on a walking tour of France as the nation fell to the Jacobins, came home singing, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, And to be young was very heaven."

Now boomers face a more daunting challenge. We have no precedent for an insurgent older generation. If anything, the stereotype for the senior years faces in the opposite direction, toward stodginess and passivity. Age has always been the time to leave the stage and ring down the curtain. For that very reason, it is essential for boomers to have a clear sense of their unique place in history. In creating an elder culture, they have no better place to start than with the unfinished business of their youth. With their attention focused on the new and the now, many boomers may have overlooked the fact that they arrived on the scene with an identity they inherited as much as created. Like every generation before them, boomers have been molded by circumstance. History writes the script for our lives, and in the case of the boomers, the script has been an eventful one.

### Not by Size Alone

What accounts for this remarkable destiny that now offers boomers a second chance to reshape history? Numbers alone were never the decisive aspect when it came to the ethos of disaffiliation that flourished during the early baby-boom era. Moral daring counted for more. In Europe, where the postwar generation was not as large as in the United States, the young were nonetheless rocking the ship of state, raising many of the

same issues as their American counterparts — which created the exhilarating impression of a coordinated worldwide movement. Maybe the young always have the advantage of claiming innocence; nevertheless, even though those in authority were quick to dismiss what they saw and heard as an outburst by spoiled kids, there was no honest way to dismiss the indictment they were drawing up of their society's failings.

As the children of parents who suffered through the Great Depression and World War II, boomers were born into a traumatized world that cried out for renewal. And renewal there would be. It took the most obvious form imaginable: sex. Not sex as boomers would later experience it, a playful, guiltless romp, but as an act no less life-affirming. The reproductive outburst of the 1940s and 1950s that brought the boomers into the world was a defiant celebration of life following years of harsh privation and genocidal violence. Later, boomers would march in the streets shouting, "Make love, not war." But that is exactly what their parents sought to do, by deed if not by word after living through the worst of wars. They made love, and they made babies. Soon enough, war caught up with them again — a Cold War that seemed destined to last forever — but not before they had launched one of the biggest reproductive binges in the history of the western world. The role boomers would later play in launching a sexual revolution has become part of their legend; but sex would never mean to them what it meant to their parents. There have been generations so defeated by war, plague, famine, and atrocity that reproduction dropped sharply, as if people had given up on life. To bring children into a world overshadowed by Auschwitz and Hiroshima was an act of stubborn courage, a commitment to life that was as brave as any revolutionary act of defiance. In a very real sense, boomers drew in idealism with their first breath, inheriting their parents' faith in the future.

Not only did they inherit a world that demanded great change, but it was a world that offered the means to make that

change — especially in the United States. No one before World War II could have guessed how fabulously rich an industrial society could become. It was the fate of the United States to show the postwar world the full productive capacity of industrialism. America, the arsenal of democracy and unscathed on its own soil by the war, ushered in the promise of a world beyond scarcity and, with it, a revolution of rising expectations. Rarely has any great war ended on so hopeful a note. Industrial technology, now equipped with more ingenious inventions than at any time since the harnessing of steam, would rapidly attain such dizzy new levels of economic growth — first in the western world and later in the century in Asia — that it became possible to imagine the abolition of poverty, and with that an end to every kind of injustice. Indeed, it is my intention to return to those high hopes in the pages that follow. But at the same time the very power that offered that promise threatened to put an end to history. No generation has ever experienced such a deep fear of extinction as Americans born into the post-World War II world. The threat was more than that of the bomb. Industrial power imperiled the ecological limits of the planet. Used unwisely, such power might, just as surely as thermonuclear war, destroy the intricate web of life that sustains us. Never before had it been so imperative to ask the most basic questions of economics and ethics. How much is enough? What can the Earth afford? How shall its abundance be shared?

Now, as boomers arrive at their senior years, an even more extraordinary factor intervenes to shape their lives. It is one thing to be a big generation; it is quite another to be a long-lasting generation. Boomers are both. Medical science has placed us within sight of a life expectancy that may surpass 100 years before the end of the 21st century. Add the newfound powers of biotechnology, and we may see human longevity extend to lengths known only in myth or science fiction. Every new generation born from here on will be a smaller part of the total population, but every

child born is apt to enjoy a longer, healthier life. Put those two facts together, and the demographic logic is undeniable. Every society in the world, and especially those that join the global economy, is destined to tilt in the direction of age.

## Endgame

The most important line of demarcation in contemporary politics may have to do with one's vision of history. Where do we stand as a society in the turbulent flow of events? Conservative thinkers believe a good dose of unrestrained entrepreneurial energy will solve all problems. Others, myself included, believe that urban-industrial society is playing out its endgame. It has arrived at a boundary condition where more of the same will not save us. Beyond that boundary lies either a downward spiral into economic and environmental chaos — or a new postindustrial world whose guiding ideas and inspiring ideals will be very different from those we have been following for the past three centuries. What follows in these pages is an effort to redefine those ideals and to present them as peculiarly the values of an aging society. Issues of this magnitude cannot be settled by a few statistics. They are matters of philosophical commitment based on what we have learned about people, their vices, their virtues, their resourcefulness, and above all their moral wisdom.

Throughout the modern era, western society has looked to its ability to redesign nature for security and prosperity, just as the nations of the western world once looked to war to achieve national greatness. We have been living out a Faustian bargain, a love affair with power: the power of our monkey cunning, the power of brute force. We have spent several generations beating our fellow human beings and the natural world into submission: native peoples, slaves, the working class, the land, the rivers, the forests, everything from the backward billions of our own species down to the microbes and the molecules of living systems. Perhaps our insatiable appetite for power made sense

as long as human beings lived in helpless fear of famine, plague, and the annihilating forces of nature. But industrial and scientific power has served its purpose; it has given us more than we need, so much, in fact, that we are running out of space to bury the excess and out of time to repair the damage. Dr. Faust may still have wonders and amazements up his sleeve, but we can no longer assume they will bring us more blessings than liabilities. The simplicity and innocence of our quest for domination has come to an end. Something new, something that goes beyond power and plenty, must take its place as the goal of history — something that has to do with finding a greater meaning for human life than shopping sprees and space shots.

My experience of the 1960s left me with no clear idea what that something might turn out to be, but I knew it had to do with questioning the rightness and rationality of urban-industrial society. That was a question none of the major ideologies of the past had ever dared to raise. On both the political left and right, capitalists, Marxists, and socialists were committed to expanding the empire of cities that now girdles the Earth. All were convinced that industrial power was the whole meaning of progress, the only defensible way to use our skills and resources. All that mattered was who ran the system. *More* — more merchandise, more profit, more growth, more of everything — was the goal of life, and technology was the means to that goal. Alongside that pursuit, everything else was defunct, irrational, backward. This was the culture I saw being challenged in the 1960s by the voices of a new generation. Eventually, the phrase *counter culture* took on a life of its own, usually becoming more superficial and purely sensational as it was passed along. Often it was understood to have more to do with hair styles or ragged jeans or light shows. Definitions like that did not have to be trivial; the counter culture did express itself in its peculiar taste in dance and music; it had its emblems and gestures. The motley, thrift-shop chic of the period was a celebration of cheap living and a rebuke

to expensive mainstream fashions. But too often the values that underlay the emblems and gestures went unappreciated. At least for me, the deeper meaning of the counter culture surfaced in the literature, music, and films that explored the meaning of sanity. *Catcher in the Rye*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Catch 22*, *The Naked Lunch*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Bell Jar*, the beat poetry of the 1950s, the acid rock of the 1960s, the psychiatric theories of R.D. Laing and the Mad Liberation Front, the psychedelic art of the underground press — works like this probed the limits of the official reality principle. Even the satirical magazine *Mad* that went out to the teens and pre-teens of the period was premised on the craziness of the adult way of life. One has to return to the early Romantic period to find the same fascination with madness and what it reveals. The boomers' early years were a time of protest, but the protest went beyond conventional political issues of justice, equality, and peace. At its most radical, it took its politics to the depths of the psyche. Change consciousness and you change the culture. Change the culture and you change values. Change values and you change politics. That was the counter culture I cared about. The manifesto that spoke to me was Shelley's proclamation: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

Now, as I look back, I can see how difficult it was to formulate such a critique in political terms, especially when those who sought to do so were as young and frequently as gauche as boomers then were. Challenging the values of urban-industrial culture requires more experiential depth than one can expect from the very young. The project of transforming perceptions and values still seems to me the way forward toward a humane society, but this cannot be done with push-button rapidity by jolting the nervous system, whether with drugs or very, very loud music. Rather, it is best done by moving with the grain of nature. Life in its normal course alters our consciousness more

than any narcotic, especially if we are given the chance to reflect on our experience. The greatest transformations any of us undergo arise out of the rhythms of ordinary life: the trauma of birth, the trials of adolescence, suffering serious disease, facing the loss of loved ones, confronting our own death. Aging turns many of us into totally different people. If we confront the experience with full awareness, aging can prepare us to learn what so many great sages have tried to teach: to be mindful of our mortality, to honor the needs of the soul, to practice compassion. Conscious aging opens us to these truths; it is a mighty undoer of the ego. It sweeps away the illusions that once made wealth and competitive success, good looks and fine possessions, seem so important. Granted, age comes hard to some, especially a certain class of alpha male who may never find his way to wisdom because he can never give up on the rat race, never cease pursuing the glittering prizes, never stop doing battle with the young guys coming along. Granted, too, there are any number of old fools in the world. Just as youth can be wasted on the young, age can be wasted on the old. But was anybody who turns out to be a fool at 70 any wiser at the age of 20? At this crux in our history, my faith goes out to our countercultural capacities, meaning our ability to change course. Once I pegged that faith to what a big younger generation might be able to achieve. Now I would look to what a big older generation is far more likely to achieve, not simply on the basis of high ideals, but by working along the grain of demographic necessity.

Once again, I remind myself that nothing good or bad is guaranteed in history. The world will always turn out to be what most of us make of it. But there are moments in time when possibilities present themselves, and we must take our chances. I believe the new beginning that boomers fell short of achieving in their youth has become more possible and more practical with every year we have added to our life expectancy—a

prospect nobody could have predicted. We have arrived at this juncture thanks to the productivity of our technology and to the demographic shift that technology has helped bring about. *Urban-industrial culture is aging beyond the values that created it.* The revolution belongs to the old, not the young.