



Voices of the American Past

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In a variation on the old Wall Street joke, they ask: Since the generation following the Boomers is so much smaller, who will buy all the securities the Boomers want to sell?

It seems logical, even just, and certainly a bit ironic. If Boomers' saving and investing have driven the market up tenfold from the base of 1982, and even if that goes smoothly for many more years, won't Boomers' dis-saving and disinvesting ultimately tank the market?

Even if demography is destiny, and even if Boomers want to sell in a mad rush, there will be buyers. Foreign buyers, putting newly earned wealth to work in the safest markets in the world. As long as the U.S. government does not do anything to spoil the national economic reputation, Boomers in their millions will be able to sell to foreign investors in even greater millions.

Perhaps more interesting to American trend-spotters, there will be lots of American investors too. The overlooked demographic features of 21st America is this: The baby boom recently ceased to be the most numerous generation in U.S. history.

The aging of America has been a widely expected trend, but the 21st century will not be ruled by graying Boomers after all. The Boomers must make way for Generation X and Y, otherwise known as the Birth Dearth and the Baby Rebound.

Generation X followed the Baby Boom and its spokesmen were feeling lost and unloved in the early 'Nineties when they named it. We don't know what Y stands for—neither do they as yet—we just know it follows X.

En masse, Boomers had fewer children, but they also delayed having families, so lots of their kids missed Generation X and are concentrated in the cohorts born after 1980. Joining them in Generation Y are the children of immigrants who came in the large waves of migrants, legal and illegal, arriving here since 1975.

The result is that there are roughly 77 million Boomers, born between 1947 and 1964, 60 million Gen X-ers, born between 1965–1980, and 80 million members of Generation Y, born between 1980–1999. Immigration will continue to swell the ranks of Generation Y for years to come.

If demographics is destiny, then the United States could have a very different destiny than the one we have expected. Perhaps the Baby Boomers will not be permitted to tax Generations X and Y into poverty, or to bind the government to the bidding of the American Association of Retired Persons and its allied groups of lobbyists for greedy geezers.

The first members of Generation Y, including a young man who lived in our house for 18 years, have just arrived at college. Their wings are still wet. They are all promise, all potential. It will take 20 more years for the last members of Generation Y to come of age.

It's their job to find their own definitional cliché, but we note with interest that they are a generation brought up with no illusions of Social Security. As matters stand, they can expect to be taxed heavily to support it, and receive little if any benefit from it. What they do about that will mark them forever.

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The Issue of Same-Sex Marriage (2001)

Throughout the twentieth century, most gays and lesbians remained silent about their sexual orientation for fear of persecution and violent backlash, although homosexual communities existed in most major cities. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, some gays and lesbians began to publicly demand tolerance and hopefully reshape homophobic views. This movement made news when gays at the Stonewall Bar in New York City fought back against a particularly violent police raid in June 1969. In the aftermath of this incident, the Gay Liberation Front made gains by advocating "gay rights" while more and more lesbians and gays "came out of the closet" and argued that their sexual orientation was legitimate. In the 1990s, gay men and lesbians became more prominent in public venues like movies, television shows, and politics, all of which helped dispel some homophobic stereotypes. Despite instances of violence toward homosexuals as well as less-subtle forms of discrimination, increasing numbers of Americans supported gay rights. In 2000, Vermont became the first state to grant legal status to same-sex marriages. As other states considered extending rights to gays and lesbians, Andrew Sullivan, a leading conservative and advocate of gay rights, offered the following editorial on same-sex marriage in The New Republic, a magazine that covers topics in American politics, culture, and society.

Questions to Consider

1. According to Sullivan, what are the arguments for and against same-sex marriage?
2. In what ways does Sullivan challenge stereotypical views of gays and lesbians?
3. In what ways is the Gay Rights Movement similar to other similar civil rights movements? Different?
4. What does Sullivan believe will result from same-sex marriage?
5. Have attitudes toward same sex relationships changed since the 1980s ("A Perspective on Aids," Document 228)?

In the decade or so in which same-sex marriage has been a matter of public debate, several arguments against it have been abandoned. Some opponents initially claimed marriage was about children and so gays couldn't marry. But courts made the obvious point that childless heterosexuals can marry and so the

comparison was moot. Others said a change in the definition of marriage would inexorably lead to legal polygamy. But homosexuals weren't asking for the right to marry anyone. They were asking for the right to marry someone. Still others worried that if one state granted such a right, the entire country would have to accept same-sex marriage. But legal scholars pointed out that marriage has not historically been one of those legal judgments that the "full faith and credit" clause of the U.S. Constitution says must be recognized in every state if they are valid in one state....

None of this stopped the Vermont Supreme Court, legislature, and governor from establishing "civil unions," the euphemism for gay marriage in the Ben & Jerry's state. It's almost exactly a year since civil unions debuted, and social collapse doesn't seem imminent. Perhaps panicked by this nonevent, the social right last month launched a Federal Marriage Amendment, which would bar any state from enacting same-sex marriage, forbid any arrangement designed to give gays equal marriage benefits, and destroy, any conceivable claim that conservatives truly believe in states' rights....

Perhaps concerned that their movement is sputtering, the opponents of same-sex marriage have turned to new arguments. Stanley Kurtz—the sharpest and fairest of these critics, summed up the case last week in *National Review Online*. For Kurtz, and other cultural conservatives, the deepest issue is sex and sexual difference. "Marriage," Kurtz argues, "springs directly from the ethos of heterosexual sex. Once marriage loses its connection to the differences between men and women, it can only start to resemble a glorified and slightly less temporary version of hooking up."

Let's unpack this. Kurtz's premise is that men and women differ in their sexual-emotional makeup. Men want sex more than stability; women want stability more than sex. Heterosexual marriage is therefore some kind of truce in the sex wars. One side gives sex in return for stability; the other provides stability in return for sex.... Both sides benefit, children most of all. Since marriage is defined as the way women tame men, once one gender is missing, this taming institution will cease to work. So, in Kurtz's words, a "world of same-sex marriages is a world of no strings heterosexual hookups and 50 percent divorce rates."

But isn't this backward? Surely the world of no-strings heterosexual hookups and 50 percent divorce rates preceded gay marriage. It was heterosexuals in the 1970s who changed marriage into something more like a partnership between equals, ... All homosexuals are saying, three decades later, is that, under the current definition, there's no reason to exclude us. If you want to return straight marriage to the 1950s, go ahead. But until you do, the exclusion of gays is simply an anomaly—and a denial of basic civil equality.

The deeper worry is that gay men simply can't hack monogamy.... One big problem with this argument is that it completely ignores lesbians. So far in Vermont there have been almost twice as many lesbian civil unions as gay male ones—even though most surveys show that gay men outnumber lesbians about two to one. That means lesbians are up to four times more likely to get married than gay men—unsurprising if you buy Kurtz's understanding of male and female sexuality. So if you accept the premise that women are far more monogamous

than men, and that therefore lesbian marriages are more likely to be monogamous than even heterosexual ones, the net result of lesbian marriage rights is clearly a gain in monogamy, not a loss. For social conservatives, what's not to like?

But the conservatives are wrong when it comes to gay men as well. Gay men—not because they're gay but because they are men in an all-male subculture—are almost certainly more sexually active with more partners than most straight men.... But this is not true of all gay men. Many actually yearn for social stability, for anchors for their relationships, for the family support and financial security that come with marriage. To deny this is surely to engage in the "soft bigotry of low expectation."... [W]ith legal marriage, their numbers would surely grow. And they would function as emblems in gay culture of a sexual life linked to stability and love.

So what's the catch? I guess the catch would be if those gay male couples interpret marriage as something in which monogamy is optional. But given the enormous step in gay culture that marriage represents, and given that marriage is entirely voluntary, I see no reason why gay male marriages shouldn't be at least as monogamous as straight ones. Perhaps those of us in the marriage movement need to stress the link between gay marriage and monogamy more clearly.... In Denmark, where *de facto* gay marriage has existed for some time, the rate of marriage among gays is far lower than among straights, but, perhaps as a result, the gay divorce rate is just over one-fifth that of heterosexuals. And, during the first six years in which gay marriage was legal, scholar Darren Spedale has found, the rate of straight marriages rose 10 percent, and the rate of straight divorces decreased by 12 percent....

When you think about it, this makes sense. Within gay subculture, marriage would not be taken for granted. It's likely to attract older, more mainstream gay couples, its stabilizing ripples spreading through both the subculture and the wider society. Because such marriages would integrate a long-isolated group of people into the world of love and family, they would also help heal the psychic wounds that scar so many gay people and their families. Far from weakening heterosexual marriage, gay marriage would, I bet, help strengthen it, as the culture of marriage finally embraces all citizens. How sad that some conservatives still cannot see that. How encouraging that, in such a short time, so many others have begun to understand.