COMMENTARY

A generation of builders, doers and heroes

By MICHAEL G. TSICHLIS

BILL MAULDIN

While not perfect, the members of the World War II generation leave to their progeny many traits worthy of emulation.

Watching those harrowing scenes in last summer's "Saving Private Ryan" wasn't easy. In addition to conveying the horrific and bloody feeling for what war is like, the film also reminded many of the terrible loss suffered by a special generation of Americans that Franklin Roosevelt once claimed had "a rendezvous with destiny."

More than a half century later, survivors of the World War II generation or, as this newspaper has described it, the Heroic Generation, can look back collectively at a century of great change that occurred on a stage where they were the lead actors. It was their generation, more than any other, that forged what we now call the "American Century."

From enduring great economic despair, to vanquishing Nazism and communism, to building a great national economic engine, the generation of Americans born between 1901 and 1925 was undoubtedly the most influential of the 20th century. The resourcefulness, perseverance and determination of this group have earned for them the collective status as a generation of builders, doers and heroes.

It was a generation whose shared purpose and common ethos brought them through very tough times to eventually go on to remake the postwar American society, a feat described by some writers as nothing less than Promethean. Yet the members of this generation seldom viewed themselves as the great shapers of the century. They were merely "doing their duty" or "doing what was right."

In a less flattering way, the World War II generation is sometimes characterized as too rigid, rationalistic and stoic or, using an archaic vernacular, just plain "square." Authority was followed more often than questioned. Trust, both in people and in institutions, was more evident on the part of this generation than any other since.

Others might criticize the generation for a slow response (or lack of it) to problems relating to race, women's rights and the environment. And of course we can't forget The Bomb.

But if the children and grandchildren of the World war II generation can momentarily set aside their own personal prejudices and family baggage, they may discover certain positive characteristics and qualities unique to the oldest generation that may be worth passing on to the children of the next millennium. The following are some notable examples:

Perseverance and Resilience. It is impossible for Boomers and subsequent generations to fathom what this generation lived through during the formative years from childhood to young adulthood. Fortunately, the level of economic deprivation and social dislocation brought on by the Great Depression hasn't been repeated. Large shantytowns built of driftwood and long lines to soup kitchens are a distant memory. Rather than worry about how we're going to eat, we are now more concerned about the status of our retirement portfolios.

Equally incomprehensible is the magnitude of human loss experienced during World War II. Nearly 300,000 people from this generation were killed and 670,000 wounded during a five-year span. Those left on the homefront endured rationing of everyday items from food to gasoline, making the land of adjustments and sacrifices that many of today's American consumers would probably find difficult, if not intolerable.

Yet despite these harsh conditions, most families persevered, and resilience was a given rule of survival. "We're going to get through this," was a phrase frequently heard. The sheer tenacity required to survive and endure those times remain instructive. While future generations will hopefully never have to face the same types of struggles, the story is one that, like the Holocaust and Jim Crow, belongs in our long-term collective memory.

Heroism and Self-Sacrifice. While American society today often strains to find public symbols of self-sacrifice and heroism, the World War II generation was never short of those who faced and overcame great challenges and adversities. From the daring spirit of Charles Lindbergh — long before the war — through the welcome-back parades for G.I.s and the early "right stuff" astronauts, to the medical breakthrough of Jonas Salk and feats of sports legends such as Jesse Owens and Joe DiMaggio, theirs was a generation inspired by the examples of others. Indeed, John Glenn's recent flight back into space revived traces of this spirit. Yet Glenn, true to the character of his generation, chose to focus on the purpose of his mission rather than indulge in his celebrity status.

While there are may unsung heroes living among us, where are our great public symbols of sacrifice and heroism today? For a brief and shining period of time, the humility, honor and good natured competition of Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa echoed the spirit of an earlier era.

Family Cohesion. With divorce rates averaging half of today's levels and out of wedlock births substantially fewer, the notion of marriage as a durable bond and a prerequisite for child-rearing largely prevailed among members of the World War II generation. Whether due to upbringing or the absence of no-fault divorce laws or both, the marriages of members of the eldest generation possessed a longevity that is much less common today. While the romanticized image of Walton's Mountain and the stereotyped placidity of June and Ward Cleaver were more fiction than reality, the upshot was that families practiced what modern commentators as different as William Bennet and Hillary Rodham Clinton have exhorted today's families to do: Stay together.

Consensus and Teamwork. Author and historian Steven Ambrose has written about the strong commitment to community, service and teamwork exhibited by this generation of "Citizen Soldiers." The experiences of war left profound and lasting changes, not least of which was a strong sense of common purpose coupled with a "can-do" attitude toward life's challenges. With hard work, persistence, team effort and, yes, a plan, there was little this generation perceived it could not accomplish.

From large WPA projects to hordes of infantrymen storming Europe and the Far East, to the construction of skyscrapers, interstate highways and sprawling mazes of suburbs, the image projected is one of a vast society of worker bees, where participation was massive and the projects were always big.

During the 1960s the generation's leaders set out to conquer a new set of goals and objectives. Some, such as the War on Poverty and Vietnam, ended in disappointmeht, while others, such as the approval of the Civil Rights Act and the moon landing were noble successes. The protracted defeat of communist authoritarianism was the last victory they would claim.

One wonders what new great accomplishments could be realized if future generations of Americans moved forward together, guided by a spirit of consensus and cooperation.

We stand at a unique passage in our history. As we welcome a new century filled with great promise and uncertainty, we are also bidding a long farewell to the last of a special generation. It is also a fundamentally different time from theirs, where persistence and resilience are frequently overshadowed by instant gratification and dependence, heroism and sacrifice give way to cynicism and gain, teamwork and collective purpose are lost to crass individualism and group balkanization, and family cohesion is replaced by families in fragmentation.

If there is truth to the notion that history often repeats itself, it may do upcoming generations well to look back and learn from the successes as well as the mistakes of the makers of the 20th century. And the hope is that, unlike their forbears, they won't need to experience a series of crises to unite them and galvanize their spirit, but merely the will to do it.

Michael G. Tsichlis, a consultant and freelance writer, lives in Crestwood.

CNN series gives false portrayal of Cold War

WASHINGTON

Jeremy Isaacs, co-producer of the CNN series, "Cold War," is unhappy with my critique of his handiwork (Nov. 3 column). I charged that his 24-part epic documentary (airing Sunday nights through April 4) is shot through with tendentious U.S.-Soviet "moral equivalence." He wrote *The Washington Post* to deny the charge. "Moral equivalence," he protests, "lies in the eyes of the beholder."

Well, behold this: The episode on the Berlin Wall features a riveting eyewitness account of an East German escapee dying in the no man's land at the Wall: "It was so heart-rending that in the middle of nowhere was a human dying and two groups were facing each other, too worried to act."

Two groups, American on one side, Soviet on the other, coldly letting this young man die. This is a perfect metaphor for the series' view of the Cold War: Those who erected the wall, then murdered the man as he sought freedom in the West share culpability with the Americans who dared not rescue him for fear of sparking an incident, perhaps a war.

Charles Krauthammer

Then, this summary, a perfect capsule of the moral symmetry practiced in Isaacs' show: "The Wall was the supreme symbol of the Cold War's cruelty and Europe's division." Rubbish. The wall was the supreme symbol of *Soviet* cruelty in turning half a continent into a giant prison house and forcing half a century of division on a continent that longed to be whole and free, and became so only as the Soviet Union expired.

"Cold War" often goes beyond mere moral equivalence to cheap anti-Americanism. Take episode 18. "Backyard" is an unending catalog of American perfidy in Latin America. It concludes thus: "1990. Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega asks the Nicaraguan people to vote him president. . . . Violetta Chamorro, Ortega's opponent, narrowly won a surprise victory. Washington spent nearly $10 million backing her campaign."

Abrupt break. Dramatic theme music. Cut to titles. End of story.

Very clever. Why, in the very first free election held by the Sandinistas, did the people throw them out? The clear implication: Because America bought Chamorro's victory. After all, just minutes earlier, we had been advised that "The American dollar, and the failures of the armed left, crushed Latin American revolutionary dreams."

These "revolutionary dreams," however, belonged not to the Nicaraguan people but to the European and American left who imagined — as "Cold War" portrays — the anti-Sandinista Contras as Yankee stooges. In fact, they represented an authentic, indigenous peasant resistance to a communist dictatorship that had hijacked the anti-Somoza revolution. The victory of the Contras and their allies in the election refuted all the fashionable nonsense said about the Contras, nonsense "Cold War" repeats.

The viewer is led to believe that Washington bought the election. But the Sandinistas were in complete control of government media, had total access to the national treasury for their campaign, and harassed the opposition with what one historian called "brownshirt tactics." Washington's help barely leveled the playing field.

Isaacs' revisionism extends not just to history but to his own show. He claims that in the egregious Episode 6 ("Reds") on the Red Scare, "we contrast McCarthyism, a spasm . . . with a system that sent millions to their deaths in the gulag."

Contrast? Spasm? Has he not seen his own show? It clearly presents the Red Scare here and the gulag there as two sides of the same coin: Cold War paranoia. It contains, for example, but one mention of children being urged to inform on the thought crimes of their parents. Which side does the show so indict? The United States!

This is, of course, a grotesque turning of history on its head. It was the Soviet Union that made national heroes of children who informed on their parents. Knowledgeable adults will wince at these falsities. But CNN is offering this series as a teaching tool for schools. How are young people to know?

They will never know it watching this thoroughly tendentious production.

What's so bad about a little boredom?

By DEBORAH MATHIS

WASHINGTON

After spending a few days in the company of junior Americans, I have concluded that, like so much else, boredom is wasted on the young.

They have no appreciation for the condition, but rather, bemoan it as if it were a yoke bearing heavily on their nubile shoulders instead of the gift that boredom is.

The young do not recognize the good fortune of idleness, of silenced alarms, of blank Things To Do lists. They don't know the pleasure of no-ness: no knocks at the door, no ringing phone, no mail to read, no places to go.

Only nothingness. Hour upon hour of it. Ah yes.

The kids, however, see this state as the mother of all curses. Worse than being grounded. Worse than not having a car. Worse than learning from Caller ID that, while you were out raking the leaves because your mother made you, the Special Someone you've been dreaming about all year finally called and you missed it.

Boredom, for the young, is the ultimate calamity.

If I close my eyes and really put my mind to it, I can remember when I felt the same way. I vaguely recall the sinking feeling when there was nothing to entertain, interest or engage me and I would feel desperate for any distraction as long as it was fun. Cleaning my room — my mother's favorite prescription for boredom — did not do the trick.

I more clearly remember being worried that something was wrong with my parents because, on those few occasions when they had leisure time, they squandered it sitting around the den together, reading to one another or just talking and drinking coffee.

This behavior, I thought, was outrageous. Go out to a restaurant, to a movie, go bowling. Anything but this. What if it's hereditary?

I remember those episodes because my mother and I talk about them often now that I have joined the recliner-loving ranks of the rarely, but always gratefully, bored. She laughs at me these days when I call her to announce, excitedly, that I have absolutely, totally, fully, wholly, 100 percent nothing to do.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so happy for you," Mama says. "You just enjoy that while you can." She is sincere and I am touched by her thoughtfulness and how happy she is for me that nothing is happening in my life. Such a good mother.

She knows that, on most days, I am going in so many different directions and juggling so many different things that I wonder sometimes whether, in a past life, I might have been a Veg-O-Matic.

To wit, my love affair with excitement, preoccupation, industry and focus has grown stale. I am now madly, lustfully in love with Boredom, that great Romeo of the weary.

If I ever get to meet him, face-to-face, I'm going to do my best to woo him away from the younguns with their fuming resentment and spite. They will adore him one day, but no time soon. In fact, for a good while yet, they're going to be consumed with keeping Boredom at bay.

Not us. Give us a blank slate any ol' time.

So, Boredom, whatcha doin' tonight? Come on over here, sweet thing, and I'll show you a good time.

Deborah Mathis is a columnist for the Chicago Tribune

Fearless forecast for 1999: Predictions will prove to be inaccurate

WASHINGTON

Futurist Robert Theobald offers this modest prediction: "Starting today, and continuing in the weeks ahead, we're going to be deluged with predictions. We'll be told by all sorts of experts what will happen in 1999, particularly in the economy, but in many other areas as well."

Worse, he predicts, too many of us will believe the hype — no matter that most predictions turn out wide of the mark.

That, of course, is a prediction, and Theobald, on the phone from his home in Spokane, Wash., chuckles at himself for falling into the snare he's warning us about.

But he's utterly serious about the perils of prognostication because it "bolsters our belief that we can, by assembling the right experts, know the future and plan for it in comforting detail, and distracts us from the necessity to pay attention to what's happening around us here and now."

One example of the inadequacy of our foresight: "The Cold War taught us that the real danger in the world was the East-West conflict, and when the Cold War came to an end we concluded that we would no longer need the CIA and spies and huge armies. We know now that the world is still a dangerous place, but dangerous in ways that are harder to predict and prepare for. We can never again be as certain about things as we once were."

William Raspberry

A second example reflects his recent work on the Y2K problem.

"I don't really expect major trouble in the United States — at least not directly," says Theobald, whose latest book is "Reworking Success: New Communities at the Millennium." "We don't yet know the extent of the problem here, but it's likely that any disruptions here will be short-lived.

"It's the second- and third-level impacts over time that may be very serious. I mean things like the possibility of Japanese bank failures, or the impossibility of importing and exporting products and the impact of that on our own economy. Suppose we take great care and fix our Y2K problem with minimal disruption but then the U.S. becomes the safe haven for all the money in the rest of the world, while those economies collapse. What will that mean here?

"People are going to have to make decisions about what they believe the effect of Y2K will be, and if they are to avoid disaster, those decisions must be acted upon early in the year.

"One of the greatest dangers is that people will wait until the last quarter of the year and then rush out to the stores and overstock on food, medicine and other goods, and the supply chain won't be able to manage it.

"Or say there's a run on cash because people will fear the banks won't be able to handle Y2K. Stocking up on cash may be a prudent decision for an individual, but if a great many of us do this 'prudent' thing, it might bring down the banks."

It's the spinoff problems that Theobald believes are beyond our predictive powers. What, for instance, might be the effect on public safety if the Y2K problem leads thousands of us to keep more cash on hand — thereby making us vulnerable to burglars and robbers intent on profiting from our caution? Most of our Y2K discussions have been about the great middle class. But what of the poor who have little chance of laying up large stores of emergency food and no chance of putting aside much cash?

What has all this to do with Theobald's warnings against predictions?

"I suppose what I'm saying is not that we shouldn't try to be prudent, as individuals and as a society, but two other things: First, that we must break the pattern that has us thinking that the government or big business or some cadre of experts is going to solve every problem with no particular effort from us. Most of the experts are wrong most of the time, and we're simply going to have to use our own best judgment.

"Second, that we know far, far less than we think we know, and that means we're going to have to get used to living with uncertainty.

"People who do white-water rafting tell me that the one thing you must not do is to say you fully understand the river, because the river will surely do something unexpected and unpredictable. All you can do is stay alert to each situation as it confronts you.

"That's precisely what we must do in these rapids of change into which we've now entered."