

America as a Sequence of Generations

A generation encompasses a series of consecutive birth years spanning roughly the length of time needed to become an adult; its members share a location in history and, as a consequence, exhibit distinct beliefs and behavior patterns. Nineteen generations have lived on American soil since the Puritans came to New England; the twentieth is just now arriving.

GENERATION	Birth years	Famous member (man)	Famous member (woman)	Era in which members came of age	Archetype
Puritan	1588–1617	John Winthrop	Anne Hutchinson	Puritan Awakening	Prophet
Cavalier	1618–1647	Nathaniel Bacon	Bridget Bishop	–	Nomad
Glorious	1648–1673	Robert “King” Carter	Hannah Dustin	Glorious Revolution Crisis	Hero
Enlightenment	1674–1700	Cadwallader Colden	Mary Musgrove	–	Artist
Awakening	1701–1723	Jonathan Edwards	Eliza Lucas Pinckney	Great Awakening	Prophet
Liberty	1724–1741	George Washington	Mercy Warren	–	Nomad
Republican	1742–1766	Thomas Jefferson	“Molly Pitcher”	American Revolution Crisis	Hero
Compromise	1767–1791	Andrew Jackson	Dolley Madison	–	Artist
Transcendental	1792–1821	Abraham Lincoln	Elizabeth Cady Stanton	Transcendental Awakening	Prophet
Gilded	1822–1842	Ulysses S. Grant	Louisa May Alcott	Civil War Crisis	Nomad
Progressive	1843–1859	Woodrow Wilson	Mary Cassatt	–	Artist
Missionary	1860–1882	Franklin D. Roosevelt	Emma Goldman	Third Great Awakening	Prophet
Lost	1883–1900	Harry Truman	Dorothy Parker	–	Nomad
GI	1901–1924	John F. Kennedy	Katharine Hepburn	Depression–WW II Crisis	Hero
Silent	1925–1942	Martin Luther King, Jr.	Nancy Pelosi	–	Artist
Boom	1943–1960	George W. Bush	Hillary Clinton	Consciousness Revolution	Prophet
Generation X	1961–1981	Barack Obama	Sarah Palin	–	Nomad
Millennial	1982–2005?	Mark Zuckerberg	Hilary Duff	Millennial Crisis?	Hero?
Homeland	2005–2025?	–	–	–	–

* The absence of a hero archetype during the mid-1800s is the one exception we have observed in a cycle that extends back through American and Anglo-American history to the Renaissance. Exceptions like this, which we suspect may be more frequent in other modern societies (from Europe to China), demonstrate that the course of history is never predetermined. In *The Fourth Turning* we speculate on why the cycle sometimes misses a beat. In the U.S. case, the timing and extreme severity of the Civil War apparently prevented the Progressive Generation from assuming an expanded civic role. Public institutions remained mostly in the hands of the Gilded Generation until nearly the end of the century.

The Generational Diagonal

Generations are formed by the way historical events and moods shape their members' lives – and by the fact that these events and moods affect people very differently depending on the phase of life they occupy at the time. Consider the era of the Great Depression and World War II. For the children of that time (the Silent Generation), its economic and geopolitical crises led to tight adult protection. For young adults (GIs), they meant challenge, teamwork, trial, and sacrifice. For those in midlife (Lost), they imposed a new sense of responsibility and a need for practical leadership. For elders (Missionaries), they offered an opportunity to champion long-held visions and establish a legacy.

This is the "generational diagonal." Chart each phase of life along one axis and each historical era along the

other. Track each generation's mind-set and behaviors across these phases and eras. What you get is a panoramic view of an evolving societal mood. As one era fades into the next, you can see how and why that mood changes. It's a simple matter of generational aging.

The generational diagonal can help provide new answers to historical questions, such as why the Great Awakening and the American Revolution happened when they did, and why the Gilded Era followed the Civil War. It can also explain why SAT scores fell through the 1970s, and why attitudes toward having and raising children became much more positive in the early 1980s. Perhaps most important, it provides a powerful tool for predicting what to expect from each phase of life – and from society as a whole – in the decades to come.

ERA	1908–1929	1929–1946	1946–1964	1964–1984	1984–2005?	2005?–2025?
		(CRISIS)		(AWAKENING)		(CRISIS)
KEY EVENTS	Women's suffrage World War I Roaring Twenties Scopes trial	Crash of '29 New Deal Pearl Harbor D-day	McCarthyism Levittown Affluent society Little Rock	Kent State Woodstock Watergate Tax revolt	Morning in America Culture wars Long Boom Y2K	Post-9/11 America
entering ELDERHOOD age 63–83	Progressive (artist) empathic	Missionary (prophet) wise	Lost (nomad) tough	GI (hero) civic	Silent (artist) empathic	Boom (prophet) wise
entering MIDLIFE age 42–62	Missionary (prophet) moralistic	Lost (nomad) pragmatic	GI (hero) powerful	Silent (artist) indecisive	Boom (prophet) moralistic	Generation X (nomad) pragmatic
entering YOUNG ADULthood age 21–41	Lost (nomad) alienated	GI (hero) heroic	Silent (artist) sensitive	Boom (prophet) visionary	Generation X (nomad) alienated	Millennial (hero) heroic
entering YOUTH age 0–20	GI (hero) protected	Silent (artist) suffocated	Boom (prophet) indulged	Generation X (nomad) abandoned	Millennial (hero) protected	Homeland (artist) suffocated