

# Letters

## The Not So Great Generation

Tom Brokaw claims that the greatest generation was the World War II generation. Paul Begala, in the April 2000 issue of *Esquire* says that the worst generation is the Baby Boomers. ("Tilting at Windmills," June 2000).

In other words, the greatest generation was also the worst generation of parents.

MAUREEN J. EHNSTROM  
Winchendon, Mass.

## Presidential Scope

Allan Lichtman, in his review of *The Presidential Difference* in the May issue, takes author Fred Greenstein to task for not writing the book that Lichtman preferred had been written. He criticizes Greenstein for examining only presidents since 1932 and argues that many other presidents did important things in our history. This is obviously true, but an examination of the modern presidency is more relevant to contemporary experience and is a widely accepted approach to analyzing the contemporary presidency. Lichtman misinterprets Greenstein's purpose as attempting to "test a typology of presidential leadership." But that was not Greenstein's purpose; he wants to

gain insights into how presidents can be effective by examining six categories of relevant presidential performance. That other dimensions of presidential performance might be examined, as Lichtman argues, is true but beside the point.

Another criticism is that Greenstein attempts "to deconstruct presidents as the sum of separate parts." But that is not at all what Greenstein is trying to do; his aim is much more limited. His book is an analysis of some of the important skills and attributes that are essential in the modern presidency. Greenstein explicitly chose not to deal with the political values of the presidents but rather with the means they had at their disposal to achieve whatever ends they sought.

It would be unfortunate if your readers missed this excellent and insightful analysis of the modern presidents because of this review—even if it does not cover *all* of the dimensions of *all* presidents in our history.

JAMES P. PFIFFNER  
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Fairfax, Va.

## Final Insult

Your note ("Tilting at Windmills," June 2000) about the insurance industry's abuse of black customers reminds me of why burial insurance was so vital in black communities in the past. Too often the mummified body that wound up on

the medical student's anatomy table was African-American, and black people had an understandable horror of suffering this final insult from the white world. A dear (white) friend of mine once explained this to me while displaying his own partially dismembered (black) cadaver on a lab table at the University of Maryland Medical School. I had it confirmed while covering the mostly black precincts of West Baltimore in the late 1940s.

RUSSELL BAKER  
Leesburg, Va.

## Missing Kovach

I read with particular interest Tracy Thompson's worthy tribute to Bill Kovach ("A Newsroom Hero," May 2000). As an avid newspaper reader who did a comparative look at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* "then" (during Kovach's short-lived tenure as editor) and "now," I dissected a week's coverage from each era to verify the stark contrast. To say such a freelance exercise found today's *AJC* marked by less copy (more ad space), less investigative zeal, less substance, and less surprise is to trifle with understatement. In too many monopoly-owned-newspaper towns such findings are the norm rather than the exception.

Lack of meaningful "context" in mass-media coverage cannot help but affect how we grapple to resolve problems that do not lend themselves to simplistic quick-fix answers. Full access to the day's intelligence is part of the role of a responsible and vital

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press and is too often overlooked in a picture-driven, soundbite news culture. Rather than being one among a nearly extinct breed of old-guard press critics, Mr. Kovach is one of those true believers in the role of newspapers in a functioning democracy who shows the way to their very survival.

BARBARA ALLEN KENNEY  
*Atlanta, Ga.*

## Paying for Blackboards

In "You Still Need a Blackboard," (June 2000), Jonathan Schorr fairly points out that charter schools need more than a dash of reformist zeal to survive and thrive. They need, for starters, a decent place to hold classes. Politicians of varied stripe revel in the rapid growth of charters over the past decade, but issues of quality must be paramount.

Organizers of charter schools almost invariably cite facilities as their biggest challenge. There are ways government might help without smothering the charter movement with excessive regulation.

One possibility is New Mexico Rep. Heather Wilson's proposal that the federal government set aside \$600 million to guarantee loans to incipient charter schools by local banks. She figures that would release about \$9 billion in charter-school financing. Another possibility would be a policy giving charters first claim on second-hand facilities, such as post offices, military bases, or other public schools. Charter organizers frequently have been resourceful in converting abandoned property to good educational use.

Charter schools don't need stifling regulation, such as would come with the Clinton Administration's bid—as part of the current Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization—to require that 95 percent of all teachers be government-licensed within four years. A charter-school strength is the ability to hire teachers with real-world experience outside the ed-school track. But Washington could help with policy tweaks—for example, requiring that state and local education agen-

cies provide charter schools their fair share of federal funds for such expensive programs as special education.

ROBERT HOLLAND  
SENIOR FELLOW  
LEXINGTON INSTITUTE  
*Arlington, Va.*

## Prescription Perks and Promos

I have a couple of comments on Stephen Pomper's article "Drug Rush" (May 2000).

First, regarding the stories of physicians who actually solicit rewards for prescription loyalty (such as Knicks tickets), I would give the doctors the benefit of the medical, if not moral, doubt and suggest that they may have fully intended to issue such prescriptions where warranted in the first place. But when a representative arrives, ready to pander, the physician may think he may as well try to get a perk out of it.

Second, as a patient, I can tell you that promotional pens, pads, clipboards, and other small office gratuities are influential indeed. When I have seen these in my doctor's office, I have assumed that the doctor was an advocate of these medications over others for similar conditions. After reading your article, I realize that these may just be handy to use because they're available for free, perhaps even helping to lower the office visit fee charged by my physician.

RUTH L. LYONS  
*Queens Village, N.Y.*

### NOTE TO READERS:

We recently experienced a breakdown of our computer system that may have resulted in the loss of some electronic correspondence that we received during the first week of June. If you have any question about whether your correspondence was received during this time, please resend it to [editors@washingtonmonthly.com](mailto:editors@washingtonmonthly.com). We apologize for the inconvenience.

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# Tilting at Windmills

BY CHARLES PETERS

*Fleeing Fort Detrick • Dancing at Fort Blossom • Sir John and Lady Bracknell  
New Perspectives on 10 Percent • The Flush Factor • Prime Time Pataki*

IS 10 PERCENT 10 PERCENT? It all depends, as our leader has pointed out, on how you define it. Among the more creative definers are Texas public school officials. Confronted with a requirement that students must rank in the top 10 percent of their graduating class to be automatically admitted to a state university, Westlake High School in Austin has decided that 10 percent really means 12.8 percent. But Lyndon Baines Johnson High School found that definition too narrow. With an imaginative approach to fact worthy of the man for whom it is named, Johnson High School decided that 15 percent captures the essence of 10 percent even better.

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AS MANY OF YOU KNOW, I THINK history will be kinder to Bill Clinton than the pundits of today are. This would not be unusual. In my lifetime, only Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy left office highly esteemed. Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, Ford, Carter, Reagan—even Nixon—are more valued today than at the end of their presidencies. Truman and Reagan are close to canonization.

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ONE OF MY HOMETOWN'S truly great sons died in May. Dr. Bert Bradford was not only an excellent physician, he was a community leader, a hero in World War II, and a man of infinite kindness. He lived for 90 years. "I have loved helping people over the years and I feel that has contributed to my good health," he

once told a group of medical students. "Staying active through gardening, fishing, cooking, hunting, and tennis has given me great joy. I have found myself much more content in these activities than in driving fancy cars and living in expensive homes."

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GEORGE W. BUSH has proposed deeply cutting the number of U.S. nuclear warheads and removing some missiles from hair-trigger status and said that he would do this unilaterally if necessary. Sounds bold but there's a slight catch. It seems that in 1995 his fellow Republicans in Congress enacted legislation prohibiting the president from removing more missiles from constant alert or from unilaterally eliminating nuclear warheads below the 6,000 level set by the START treaty.

So here we have another area like education where whatever good ideas the governor may have are unlikely to be supported by congressional Republicans. They are not going to be happy with him until he hairs over and reverts to his Bob Jones self.

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AS I READ A REVIEW BY ANNA Kisselgoff that appeared in *The New York Times* of June 3, it occurred to me that I may have been insufficiently attentive to recent developments in the world of dance. In case you too have been guilty of not following this

art form as closely as you might, let me bring you up to speed with a quote from the review:

"Thus a provocative image of fully clothed men pulling their penises and women jiggling their breasts to the beat of James Lo's score suddenly looks playful."

That sentence described a piece called "Excessories." Next comes "Fort Blossom," of which Kisselgoff writes:

"The contrast between the clothed women and nude men is furthered by the delineated movement of the women and the more spontaneous look of the men's wrestling style. In their implied coupling, the men sandwich a plastic pillow between their bodies as they lie on top of each other. The women's courtship is more subtle: they lie face down and one woman's foot imperceptibly crosses over the other's calf. The merging of the two pairs in a martial arts finale results in an abrupt ending. 'Fort Blossom' suggests an uninhibited search for a new direction, not yet defined."

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I WAS TROUBLED TO LEARN that *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* had all agreed to a deal offered them by a United Airlines publicist that did not, to put it gently, seem to be in the public interest. The three papers were to get exclusive details on the \$5 billion merger with US Airways so

**There is a  
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debate.**