



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT A GENERATION GLOATS



A polymorphous mass of willful protoplasm able to reshape the world through the unconscious exercise of its desires. It sounds like a character in a novel by Michael Crichton. But it's not; it's just the baby boomers demonstrating the implacability of the law of supply and demand. The first postwar crop of American offspring is so huge and so demographically concentrated that for half a century we have constituted an irresistible market force. What boomers want, boomers get, and we don't need to wheedle. In fact, we've got so much buying power that we don't even need to know ahead of time what we want.

Evidence of our omnipotence permeates the culture. We conjured up a plentiful supply of station wagons when we were Little Leaguers, muscle cars when we got our driver's licenses, thrifty imports when we were struggling young grownups, minivans and S.U.V.s when we became parents, and a wide selection of overpriced two-seaters now that we've hit middle age. Each successive reconception of the automobile, though seemingly fortuitous, has perfectly suited our requirements.

Our generation was the first with suf-

ficient market clout to dictate the terms of its own adolescence—and what an adolescence it was. As soon as we were old enough to shave, the whole world had to stop what it was doing and spend a decade preoccupied with sex. Capitalism, with breathtaking efficiency, responded to our surging hormones by providing miniskirts, water beds, and co-ed dorms. (More recently, in anticipation of our evolving needs, the market has given us Viagra.)

The major childhood diseases were conquered when we began to catch them. Suburbia arose in order to give us

sidewalks on which to ride our bikes. Airlines invented business class and frequent-flier miles once we started travelling for our employers. VCRs materialized when we lost interest in dating. The Soviet Union fell when we grew tired of fearing it. Golf clubs and tennis racquets got easier to use when we developed an interest in swinging them.

Back in the eighties, editorial writers used to warn that baby boomers would be the first Americans to be less prosperous, as a generation, than their parents. We responded, in the nineties, with the biggest bull market in history, treating ourselves to the fast-food version of getting rich. (Take my 401(k) and Super Size it, please!) Members of generations X and Y have not displaced us; they have merely become our worker bees, toiling in their windowless cubicles in Silicon Valley, mindlessly generating the capital gains on which we will retire.

We haven't finished yet, of course; our dynasty has another thirty or forty years to run. Guessing what those years will bring us doesn't require much imagination. Cure for arthritis. Coronary bypasses on an outpatient basis. Elimination of various inconvenient taxes (such as the one on our parents' estates). Redefinition of the potbelly as a secondary sexual characteristic.

But there's no need to prognosticate. Whatever the particulars turn out to be, we can already be certain of one thing: what we get will be exactly what we want.

—David Owen

