

For release on delivery
10:00 a.m., EDT
May 29, 1993

Surviving Boomer Politics

Address by

Lawrence B. Lindsey

to

The 188th Commencement of Bowdoin College

Brunswick, Maine

May 29, 1993

Surviving Boomer Politics

Last fall, when I received a letter from President Edwards telling me about the honor Bowdoin is bestowing on me, my first reaction was to be flattered. My second reaction was that I'm not old enough. After all it was barely yesterday that I sat where you're sitting. All right it was 17 years ago. And I don't want any of the smart alecks among you to tell me that most of next year's freshmen weren't even born when I graduated. But it was not my grey hairs or the fact that forty seems downright young these days that got me over the shock of getting an honorary degree. It was the realization that my generation, the Baby Boom, is now assuming power in this country.

The first Boomer Vice President was elected in 1988. We got our generation's first Supreme Court Justice in 1991, the year I joined that other grey beard Washington institution -- the Federal Reserve Board. Last year we elected our first boomer President along with a Vice President two years his junior. Those elections also produced a Boomer plurality in the House of Representatives. And as modesty is not among our generational virtues, you will hear self confident talk at Boomer dinner parties in Washington about how we will be in charge for the next three decades.

I do admit to a sense of smug generational self-satisfaction that we've finally tossed the old folks -- the ones who caused all of the world's problems -- into their well deserved retirement. There was never any doubt in my generation's

collective conscience that this day would come. Frankly, our belief was that it would not come soon enough. Well, we're here -- we've made it. Why then am I beginning to get a little nervous? Why do I call my talk Surviving Boomer Politics?

Boomers are doers. We want results. Our focus is performance not process. This affects our behavior on issues both big and small. Too big a trade deficit with Japan? Forget the international arbitration processes that America has promoted for four decades. Instead, why not choose a trade deficit target and threaten to enforce it unilaterally with U.S. law? Or take that Watergate era reform called "Government in the Sunshine". At the Fed, a distinctly non-Boomer institution, we take it seriously. Whenever four of the seven Governors find themselves together in the hall, we make sure that one of us leaves so as not to have a quorum present. Silly? Perhaps, but its the law. Some of my fellow Boomers were assigned the task of developing a health care policy. Driven by the importance of the issue and the need to produce results, these Boomers simply assumed the law didn't apply. The Federal Judge involved, not a Boomer, called such behavior "stunning". Or when an ethics rule threatened attendance at a major Washington social event, the Boomer approach was to simply suspend the ethics rule for a year.

As a generation we view these rules as written to address the corruption of another generation. They really weren't meant to apply to us. Remember, we were at the barricades protesting the abuses of Johnson and Nixon. That experience also helps us

to know from a generational point of view, that we're right. We've been nursing our sense of moral certitude -- on both the left and the right -- ever since we were teenagers.

Howe and Strauss, in their book Generations talked about other eras when morally certain generations like the Boomers ran things. Our generational type burned the witches at Salem, brought on the Civil War and enacted Prohibition. Today my cohorts practice their exorcisms by managing the Political Correctness movements on college campuses. As for Prohibition, I have no doubt about my generation's ability to end America's evil nicotine habit through a combination of taxation, regulation, and social approbation.

As for our Civil War, it has been and is still being fought between interest groups, think tanks, and Congressional staffers on both the left and the right. One boomer Congressional leader whom I greatly respect, explained it with a parallel to Clausewitz's observation that diplomacy is simply war by other means. Politics, he claims, is simply Civil War by other means. It is shocking to observe the number of jobs which exist in Washington simply to advance a particular cause at all costs. The ranks of these jobs are held by Boomers in a promotion system in which success is determined simply by a capacity to destroy your opponent.

This vicious side of political life has made its way into public consciousness over some key confirmation fights. The personification of policy disputes makes the abstract principles

involved understandable to every man and woman and so are intentionally used to polarize the nation -- not to mention to collect funds from an otherwise apathetic public to pay for the armies on both sides. One victim of this process aptly likened it to a public lynching.

Personifying a policy dispute requires the creation of a demon. The mortal involved must take on superhuman abilities. We were told in one confirmation fight that the nominee's approval would mean that women would die in back alleys and lunch counters would again become segregated. Such rhetorical excess should be considered laughable. Instead, it brought in hundreds of millions of dollars to the groups which used such arguments.

My assigned mission today was to advise you on how to be successful in my profession. My concerns with the potential excesses of my generation lead me to two suggestions. The first is, for your own self interest, do not make politics your main profession. Consider it an avocation. To protect your ego, not to mention feed your family, you should always have an out, a career to which you can return. Besides, the experience that you gain will stand you in good stead. The boomer model of beginning your campaign for the Presidency at age 16 may well be the best way to get elected by the time you're 46. But for most who choose this course, it is statistically more likely to lead to an empty life of bitter disappointments.

My second suggestion is more high minded. Your generation will at some point in the future be called upon to replace us

Boomers. The country will not be demanding a replay of our mistakes but a change of pace. If you are to succeed where we are likely to fail, it will be by returning civility to the political process. The Republic is impoverished every time an honorable man or woman is bloodied by becoming the personification of a political dispute. Please, you must personally renounce the public lynching approach to political discourse that my generation has adopted in our roles of interest group leaders and Congressional staffers. You must set America's politics on a more civil footing by respecting the honor and the privacy of those with whom you disagree.

If indeed politics is Civil War by other means, let us recall the lessons from when our national politics did indeed turn into Civil War. Our Nation's President urged a resolution based on charity for all and malice toward none. His death, and the subsequent rejection of his approach led to a needless division of our country which lasted almost a century and from which we still suffer today.

We Boomers are too fixed in our ways, we have practiced our blood sport too long to realistically expect a cessation of hostilities. To date, the accidents of history have meant that it has been the Left of my generation which has savaged the Right. Soon we will witness a reversal of this savagery, and even those of us on the Right who might counsel moderation will see the spectacle as a form of turnabout -- fair play.

That is why you must renounce the personification of

politics before you too use it as a weapon. Within any generation, it is a Genie which, once let out of the bottle, is impossible to dispose of. But, they say that time heals all wounds. Certainly the passage of political power from one generation to another offers our great country a chance for renewal.

Today we use that opportunity to end an era mired in process and compromise in which nothing seems to get done. In its place we Boomers will establish an era based on achieving the ends themselves, with much less concern about the means to those ends.

Sooner than you think, your generation's opportunity will come to renew our institutions. You will inherit an America with a renewed sense of purpose, perhaps an excess of purposes. Government will cease to be thought of as lethargic and bureaucratic, and more as frenetic. Most important, the price of having established social justice may well be a legacy of many individual injustices. This is the America which will require your generation's healing touch, your generation's energy for renewal. I believe that you will succeed at your mission, as my generation will have succeeded at ours. But, to do so effectively, you must first understand the dangers of Boomer Politics and renounce the political tactics we Boomers have adopted all too easily. Thank you.