

Prologue

My father was a rock-ribbed Nebraska Republican who gave the impression that everyone in our family had belonged to the Grand Old Party since the Civil War. I was a boomer, born just after the Second World War and immersed in the radical politics of the 1960s—the struggle for civil rights, the so-called war on poverty, the more real and tragic war in Southeast Asia, and the campaign against the nuclear arms race. In those heady days, left-wing Democrats were more attractive to me than my father's Republicans. My disagreements with Dad, however, went beyond a simple allegiance to different candidates and political parties. Our belief systems, it seemed to me, pointed in opposite directions. We couldn't even find a common ground where we could begin our political discussions.

The constant challenge to my developing values became unbearable during my late teen years. I felt that I would suffocate if I didn't get away from home. As soon as I could, I moved away from Nebraska, first to Illinois, then to Virginia, and later to Canada. During these years I continued to visit my parents every few months. I never stayed long, though. Whenever I lingered more than a few days, the old antagonisms would resurface. But as the years drew on, the visits became a little more bearable. Dad and I learned to set aside some of our differences and find activities that we could share. Sometimes, especially when my father was in his nineties, our shared experience was nothing more than sitting together on the porch to watch cars and transports zip by on the stretch of sandhills highway at the front of the house. Our disagreements were never resolved, but they eventually lost some of their power to hurt.

My father was almost a hundred years old when he died. A few years after his passing, the local newspaper mentioned him in a "Sixty Years Ago Today" column. My mother sent me a copy. I was shocked to read that in 1932 my father had been elected secretary of the local branch of the Farmers' Holiday Association. This movement, launched during the Great Depression, took its odd name from the way its members pressed for a moratorium, a holiday, on farm foreclosures. Leaders of the movement tried to manipulate the economy, coercing farm commodity prices higher by reducing, through persuasion if possible and force if necessary, the production of farm goods. Their goal, they claimed, was a fair deal for farmers who were oppressed by banks and big business.

Had my father, a *laissez faire* Republican, really joined such a radical, anti-capitalist organization? The next time I was in Nebraska, I made the round of my older relatives, newspaper clipping in hand. A few careful questions uncovered more family

secrets: in the 1930s my father had been, not a Republican, but a strong supporter of F.D.R. and his Democratic New Deal.

When I learned about Dad's political vacillations, our differences took on new meaning. No longer was our generation gap a timeless, uncrossable gulf. In the long course of his life, my father, it appeared, had crossed this gap on his journey to the place where my adolescent self encountered him. Dad, born in 1890, was part of a US "signature generation," a concept I will explore in more detail in the first chapter. The shifts in his political framework during the middle years of the twentieth century were typical for members of his generation.

The children of signature generation Americans, as we will see, usually join their parents in the cultural framework set up by the generation. I was an exception, however. Dad was already in his late fifties by the time I was born. When I began to take up my own cultural identity, I had a choice between my father's value system and the emerging value system of the signature generation that was replacing his. I opted for the values of my age cohort, he remained with his. Our differences, I suddenly realized, were not just a result of voluntary political choices. Some of them derived from the deep social chafings that are a natural part of the transition from one signature generation to the next. Dad had been acting out his role as a guardian of the mature values of his generation. I had been pioneering the values of a new signature generation.

The transition that fueled the conflict in my natal family has repeated itself several times over the two hundred and thirty years of US history. Whenever a new signature generation appears, a classic generation gap opens between American parents and their mutinous offspring. In the not-too-distant future, another of these troublesome transitions will lead to a generation gap at least as wide as the one that separated my father from me. This time, though, my role will be reversed. I will be standing in my father's shoes when the transition arrives, watching a new generation overthrow a way of life that I and my contemporaries have spent fifty years constructing.

The prospect is unsettling. Is it possible that my way of life will one day seem to my children or grandchildren as irrelevant as my father's world now seems to me?