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A Timely Reminder from Our Elders



by K. Daniel Glover
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A review of *The Greatest Generation*
by Tom Brokaw
Random House, 1998, 390 pages, $24.95

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Every time my wife, Kimberly, and I see evidence of the character flaws of self-indulgent baby boomers or their spoiled children born into Generation X, we share this lament: America needs a good depression -- maybe a replay of the Great Depression. What better way to awaken a society of parents who live off credit and children who traipse around the mall with cell phones and pagers, we wonder. We are only half-joking.

Perhaps, as the saying goes, we should be careful what we wish for. But after having read *The Greatest Generation*, television newscaster Tom Brokaw's first attempt at book-length non-fiction, we are more convinced than ever that America and her profligate people desperately need a heavy dose of humility.

Portrait of a generation

The book has its genesis in two trips that Brokaw, a three-decades-plus veteran of NBC News and currently the sole anchor and managing editor of its *NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw*, made to Normandy, France. Both trips were to commemorate, for NBC viewers, the 40th and 50th anniversaries of the Allied forces' D-Day invasion of Europe during World War II.

The first trip, in 1984, triggered what Brokaw calls "a life-changing experience." He suddenly realized just how much his father's contemporaries had sacrificed for their nation. They had endured, with no respite in between, both modern history's greatest economic calamity and arguably its most horrific war.

Soon after Brokaw visited the sands of Normandy for another D-Day retrospective in 1994, he knew he had the makings of a book. Who would not want to read of "a generation that, by and large, made no demands of homage from those who followed and prospered economically, politically and culturally because of its sacrifices ... a generation of towering achievement and modest demeanor"?

Brokaw's thesis is captivating, to be sure. And the book is a quick and easy read, in part because of the numerous photographic memories of the grass-roots Americans who act as the main characters.

Through this tome, we catch fascinating glimpses of men and women in war, in business, at play and at home. We learn of loyalty, of courage, of honor, of humility, of religious faith, even of human frailty in body and spirit. *The Greatest Generation* is both a celebration of the rugged individualism so desired in America and of the love of others that binds the country.

The best way to review the book is to let its protagonists speak for themselves, as Brokaw himself does. So here are a few samples of what you will find between the covers:

- "The war taught me the importance of integrity in dealing with people. ... I just wanted to help people. Kids start out now thinking, 'How much money can I make?' not 'What can I do, how much can I help?'" (Dr. Charles O. Van Gorder, North Carolina)

An unnecessary literary detour

- "I believe we're being victimized by our affluence. We don't appreciate things because you don't work for them." (John "Lefty" Caulfield, Massachusetts)

- "I learned about patriotism through my school and family, and I don't think you can get those values across in schools now. ... I would like to think that if the United States were attacked, we would band together, but I'm not sure." (Claudine "Scottie" Lingelbach, Missouri)

Brokaw's book does have a couple of flaws, however, and they have their roots in the newsman's political leanings and his affinity for the Washington crowd. Brokaw rightly excoriates a generation that tolerated, and sometimes even encouraged, racial and sexual discrimination.

But he crosses the line into political correctness periodically when he chastises the subjects of his book for daring to believe that women should make the care of their homes (and children) their top priority. That trademark characteristic of the generation Brokaw lauds is sorely missed by many people today.

The author also veers off theme late in the book. He inexplicably dedicates more than 100 pages (or nearly one-fourth) to the exploits of the rich, the famous, the privileged and the powerful. Brokaw must have seen a connection between the likes of Lloyd Kilmer of Sun City, Ariz., and, say, former President George Bush. But I cannot see the connection.

In line with the old-fashioned belief that certain types of language are not appropriate for public discourse, *The Greatest Generation* is virtually free of profanity -- until Brokaw decides to interview his Washington buddies. Then we get to read of Al Neuharth, the founder of *USA Today* who dubbed his memoir *Confessions of an S.O.B.*, and former *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee, who seems to relish his mastery of the four-letter word.

Warning from an IC reader

That minor flaw aside, Brokaw certainly accomplishes his goal of providing a fitting "tribute to those men and women who have given us the lives we have today." His "family portrait" of *The Greatest Generation* is one that we can only hope someday will be discovered and emulated by the lesser generations of today, my wife's and my own included.

And if we fail to learn from our ancestors? Now may be an appropriate time to consider the response of an *IntellectualCapital.com* reader to a recent article on the woes we may face because of the Year 2000 computer problem.

"[D]on't worry," Tammy admonished a fellow reader. "God will go on teaching [people] one disaster at a time, the way He always has. The Great Depression didn't teach any other generation besides its own, and this generation will also have to learn things the hard way."

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