

## **My Generation**

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So, there they were. After ten years of a world-wide depression followed by five years of a world-wide war, the parents of my generation let out a collective sigh. "Are we done with all this crap now," they mused. "Can we just go back to normal? Can we get on with our lives without all the senseless suffering and bloody carnage?"

Welcome to the fifties. Well, technically, it began in the late forties. A time of rebirth and opportunity. And not just for the victorious. In a rare display of humanity and foresight, the victors didn't just bend the defeated over and make them their bitch.

America created the Marshal Plan named after Secretary of State George Marshall, who in 1947 proposed that the United States provide economic assistance to restore the infrastructure of the defeated and humiliated, and in some cases incinerated, fellow humans we had fought and give them a new and improved lease on life.

What a concept! And for America: Finest. hour. Ever.

Over here in the states, the surviving soldiers who had fought in the big war got to go to college for free, a luxury previously reserved mostly for the Richie Riches of blue blood aristocracies. For the first time ever, middle and working class families got to own a home.

Our parents thought they had died and gone to Disneyland - and actually got the real thing July 1955. And to celebrate their good fortune they paired off and, God bless 'em, started knocking out the next generation.

From 1946 to 1962 there was an explosion of pregnancies. A new generation born in peace and prosperity, raised on black and white television and frozen dinners. And this Bratty Bunch swarmed onto the playgrounds throughout America, fueled by sugar and infused with the care-free spirit that comes only to the spawn of the victorious. It was Kool-Aid for the kids and cocktails for the grown-ups.

But, alas, our parents' euphoria was not to last. The wholesome, squeaky-clean fifties were destined to enter an alternate universe in the next decade. And America was never going to be the same.

What's that Irish toast? "May you live in interesting times?" Holy guacamole, did we have an interesting time in the sixties. Most people agree that the period we refer to as the sixties officially began with Martin Luther King's March on Washington in August 1963. And kicked into overdrive three months later when Kennedy went down in Dallas. And ended in August 1974 with Nixon's resignation.

I almost had a ring side seat to Kennedy's assassination, by the way. Not in Dallas, but a couple of weeks before. The president was scheduled to attend the Army/Navy game at Soldiers Field in Chicago. I was at that game. My dad had gotten tickets and, not being remotely sports oriented, I was way more excited about possibility getting a glimpse at the president than the game itself. But the president's men were tipped off about a plot to take him out as he weaved through the streets of Chicago on his way to the game and JFK was a no show.

I wanted to talk about the sixties because I wanted to give credit to those exceptional times I came of age in. Perhaps more than anything, it molded what I became and who I still am today. I probably would have been a rebellious troublemaker anyway, but the era certainly encouraged me, gave me permission as it were, to not accept life at face value. To question things. And me and my generational peeps loved to question stuff. We questioned *everything*.

We questioned that supposedly self-evident truth in the Bill of Rights that said all of us were created equal. We saw it defiled by race riots and civil rights marches throughout the land.

We questioned our presidents. Following years of iconic statesmen like FDR and Eisenhower, after Kennedy got taken out by the CIA (or the mafia or the Cuban nationals or all of the above), Lyndon Johnson took over and led the respectable image of the presidency out onto the White House lawn and shot it in the head like it was a lame horse.

He was followed by Richard Nixon who tied a rope around one of the dead horse's hooves and attached it to the bumper of his presidential limousine then dragged it through the streets of Washington DC until it was an unrecognizable heap of blood, guts and dead horsey bones.

We questioned basic social conventions like dress codes and hygiene. We grew our hair out long and wore blue jeans and tie-dyed tee shirts *everywhere*.

Even religion and God were not safe from the crosshairs of us inquisitive new kids on the block. Unlike my parents and their parents before them and theirs before them, I began to seriously question my Catholic faith. And, after

some heated arguments with mom and dad and some discussions with the parish priest they insisted I take part in, I finally made the break.

Of course, every new generation figures out ways to kick some sand into the face of the previous one. But even the fifties iconic bad boy, James Dean, was only a rebel *without* a cause. We were anything but. We were hell bent of staging a full-blown revolution. And nothing illustrated that more than the war in Vietnam.

All of these questions and ambiguities were mere sideshows to the main event us boys to men faced during the latter part of the sixties and early seventies. After my grandparents and parents had lived through the first and second “good” World Wars, we found ourselves in a quagmire of doubt in the rice paddies of Vietnam.

We now had our very own war to contend with. Not the actual running of it, of course. That was being handled by the previous generation, the one we would one day dub the Greatest Generation. Hey, even the greats strike out once in a while.

Many words have been written and more movies than the Marvel franchise have been released on the Vietnam War. And I don't feel inclined to add my analysis to them. But what I would like to talk about is what it was like to be a young man/boy coming of age during the Vietnam era.

I turned eighteen in 1970. The same year *“I'm Eighteen”* by Alice Cooper was released. How cool is that? The military draft was in full swing and every male my age had to choose how they would face, or not face, the music.

If you drove past a strip mall in 1970, chances are one of the store fronts was leased out by that uniquely sixties creation: the draft counselor. If you looked in the window of one of these store fronts you would see a sparse scene of hastily assembled card tables and folding chairs. They were manned by scruffy hippie types who were handing out mimeographed copies of flyers and brochures.

You would see those draft counselors having earnest conversations with young men who were trying to decide what the hell they were going to do about this fine mess they found themselves in. They each had a decision to make. And these younglings knew whatever decision they eventually arrived at could seriously alter their future. It could land them in prison. It could exile them to a foreign country. It could get them maimed or killed.

If you were an eighteen-year-old male and needed some advice, you might have ended up inside one of these store fronts seeking counsel. And here are some of the questions you might have asked and the answers you might have heard:

*Q: What happens if I burn my draft card?*

A: Be prepared to go to jail. And remember, when you get out, you'll have a criminal record that will follow you the rest of your life.

*Q: What if I Flee to Canada?*

A: You will be a deserter and, unless this country one day decides to grant amnesty to people who avoided the draft this way, you will never, *ever*, be allowed to reenter the country. You can never come home again.

*Q: What if I choose to be a conscientious objector?*

A: Yeah, you can do that. You will spend a few years as a candy striper in a VA hospital. But, like prison, you will carry a life-long stigma that who knows how many employers will not look too kindly upon in the future.

*Q: What about a student deferment?*

A: Ahh, the 2-S deferment. If your parents can afford to send you to college, you're one lucky ducky. And hopefully, this thing will be over when your four years of nocturnal keggers and morning hangovers come to an end.

*Q: Can I obtain a physical deferment?*

A: Let me count the ways. If you can get your doctor to sign off, you might be able to avoid becoming a character in a future Oliver Stone movie. (Bone spurs, anyone?)

*Q: What if I can't get a physical deferment, is there a way I can I sabotage my military physical exam?*

A: Here again, there are many ways like bringing a safety pin with you and prick your finger so you can add a few drops of blood to your urine. You can show up wearing girl's panties. None are foolproof, but any one is worth a shot.

*Q: I don't feel comfortable with any of these options, but I still don't want to get sent to this jungle-boogey clusterfuck. What can I do?*

A: Enlist in the National Guard.

Everybody, *everybody*, who lived through the Vietnam War years knows that *everyone* who signed up for the national guard during that time, while technically

not a draft dodger, were most certainly a *war* dodger. It was the number one way privileged kids who had designs on a future in politics or business chose to have their flack jacket and parade around in it too. (Yes, George W., I'm talking about you.)

It's hard to imagine in this age of "thank you for your service" acknowledgements that strangers offer soldiers they pass by in airports how unique an effect this war had on America. And however bad you imagine the young boys who returned home from their nightmare on the front lines had it, I promise, you aren't even close.

In his groundbreaking work, *What it is Like to go to War*, Vietnam veteran Karl Marlantes related a story of being stateside in his uniform. He was riding on a train when a very attractive young woman walked up to him. He was rapt in attention as she leaned over to him. Then she spat in his face and walked away. Never before in the history of our country had returning veterans been treated like those returning from Vietnam.

And that wasn't all. Pick a war, any war, you will probably come up with a patriotic song extolling the virtues of our troops and the nation's righteous cause. Revolutionary War, *Yankee Doodle*. Civil War, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. First World War, *Over There!* And you certainly won't find anti-war songs in the popular culture of the day.

Vietnam? You had a cavalcade of chart-busting songs *condemning* the war. Pick up any album from those years and you will most likely find a song on the topic, sometimes it was the theme of an entire album. Anti-war songs were

literally the soundtrack of those years. Even my album released in 1974 had an anti-war ballad on it.

There has been an anti-war fringe movement throughout American history in many wars, but with Vietnam, that fringe protest movement quickly grew into an ever-present undertaking that saturated every aspect of American life and culture. Music, fashion, film.

How in the world did this come to be?

My thinking is that it was the perfect confluence of circumstances. A generation that was already questioning everything was now faced with a war that, every day, was growing more and more questionable. And whatever emotion that is conjured up inside of you regarding those who protested the war, with the hindsight of time, you have to give war protesters credit for the fact that they just happened to be on the right side of history.

I had grown up being carpet bombed by war flicks that romanticized the bejesus out of war and the men who fought them. My brother and I played war with toy soldiers in our room and with toy guns out in the prairie behind our house with other boys in the neighborhood. To this day, if you show me a picture of a tank or fighter plane from World War 2, I can probably name it. We *loved* playing at war.

But now we had the real deal. And it wasn't black and white like the films we grew up on. It was all gray. And every day it was becoming more and more clear that there were no good guys in this fight.



My older brother turned 18 in 1967, the year “Eve of Destruction”, another anti-war anthem, became a hit for Barry McGuire. The 2-S student deferment was beginning to be scrutinized for the Get-Out-of-Combat FREE Card for snotty middle and upper class kids that it was.

With this in mind, my brother was advised to sign up for ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corp) as a freshman in college. This would earn him a 1-D deferment. And if you bailed out after two years, you wouldn't have to actually serve. Pretty ingenious, right?

It seemed that way until his senior year when some busy-body government drone figured out that there was some fresh meat to be processed in that cadre of former 1-D cadets. So they called up all of those ROTC deferment holders like my brother who had bailed after the two-year milestone and bumped them up to 1-A status. And in the Spring of 1971, he was drafted.

His plan was to enlist in the national guard, but he wasn't crazy about the possibility of winding up on the streets of America doing the dirty business of picking off peaceful protestors. Kent State, where four students had been gunned down by the National Guard, had happened less than a year before and was still burned into everyone's psyche.

My brother had six months after being called up before he had to report for duty. He was told that every week new enlistment opportunities were posted, literally on a cork board, down at the recruitment center. So, he went down there every week until he found a deal he could, literally, live with. And a sweet deal it was.

On one visit he saw a position as a cook for the Sea Bees Reserves, the construction unit of the Navy. It was only 4½ months active duty. All stateside. He jumped on it and that summer he was shipped out to the sunny skies of San Diego for boot camp. Mission Accomplished: war dodged.

That same summer I was looking to enter my second year of college, 2-S deferment tucked securely in my back pocket. Hindsight, of course, is everything. Today I know that the war was an abomination and embarrassment to my country. And I believe the young boys who stood up and burned their draft cards and went to prison refusing to be part of the war were patriots along with the brave souls who went to fight and die.

But in 1971, my eighteen-year-old brain was not even close to being convinced about the war one way or the other. To this day I'm not sure what option I would have taken if I had to face it. My perspective was not one of hindsight. This was happening in real time. But, in the end, fate stepped in and I landed on the free space of my Vietnam bingo card.

In the middle of the dog days of summer, resentment towards the 2-S deferments by the working-class folks and the politicians who represented them became too much to ignore. It was decided that the 2-S deferment be eliminated altogether and replaced by a lottery to determine who would be called up.

And so, on August 5, 1971, my college deferment was made null and void while a nationwide lottery was held for all boys/men born in the year 1952.

We sat in front of our black and white television as they broadcasted the results of the lottery in a slow scroll down through the days of the year, starting

with January 1. My birthday was December 24. Could we have more drama?  
When my birthday finally made its appearance, my number was 245. We knew anyone with a number over 100 would most likely be safe. My mother, who had lost her first love in WWII, squealed and cried as she threw her arms around me saying, over and over again, “my boy’s not going to die, my boy’s not going to die!”