September 12, 2005

The Katrina Generation: An Adolescent Leadership?

by Rushworth M. Kidder

If the Katrina calamity had been managed by that "Greatest Generation" of Americans who fought World War II, would the results have been different?

The answer seems obvious to me. But why? What was it about the Greatest Generation that would have changed the outcome? What is it about the Katrina Generation -- my generation, alas -- that makes the contrast so unfavorable?

It's not enough to say that their generation was more patriotic, or their world more simple, or their nation more homogeneous. In fact, the culture they inherited was shaped by the shattering dislocations of World War I. During their growing-up years, that war produced a sharp questioning of patriotism and militarism that pervaded the literature of the age -- from Hemingway and Cummings to Dos Passos and Ford Madox Ford.

Yet off that generation went to triumph in history's first fully mechanized war. And home they came to master a fractured global economy, corral a business cycle that had spawned the Great Depression, create international air travel, and engineer the interstate highway system. Of course there were historic missteps -- of corporate greed, of political selfishness, of academic hubris. And of course there was hyperbole: The age that brought us the Superman comics was, in the end, still only human. But it remained an age of builders. A devastating natural disaster would have called forth decisive leadership, quick coordination, and immediate commitment. Put simply, theirs would have been an adult response.

By contrast, the response to Katrina seems oddly adolescent. Just when responsibility needed to be asserted, the situation dissolved into blame shifting. Just when compassion should have trumped suspicion, an intense self-absorption took hold. Just when cooperation should have overcome divisiveness, a relentless polarity set in. Just when quick, clear orders should have been given for the greater good, petty sensitivities arose about personal power and posture.

Blame, self-centeredness, black-and-white oversimplifications, an unwillingness to accept responsibility -- these are things that teenagers struggle to overcome. Last week's partisan squabbling in Washington about how to investigate government's failures of response only compounded these intimations of immaturity. With the dead still uncounted and thousands of the living still without homes or jobs, the political bickering over committee assignments seemed more fitting for a preschool playground than a legislative leadership.

To assert that the United States is a nation led by full-grown adolescents would, of course, be to descend into still another adolescent characteristic: wild overstatement. But if a key difference between past and present leadership centers on maturity, it's worth asking why an earlier generation grew up in ways the current generation never did?

One answer is courage. Societies through the ages have organized rites of passage around expressions of courage. Want to become an adult? Then prove yourself in battle, in hunting, or in personal survival. Those elders knew that courage always involves an element of risk and an overcoming of danger. What united the Greatest Generation was that so many of its members faced and surmounted danger in World War II. As a result, courage came to be broadly honored, perhaps even expected, in that generation -- even among those who remained at home.

So are young people with no war to fight doomed to perpetual adolescence? Not at all. The physical courage of warfare is not the only pathway to adulthood. One can also mature through expressions of moral courage -- having the fortitude to stand up for one's principles. That, too, can involve real risk.

But what if nobody wanted to take moral risk? What if an entire generation were raised in a cocoon of comfort with so little danger that it never learned either physical or moral courage? Would it reach the age of maturity with the mentality of adolescence? Would it remain stuck on the teenage side of the rite of passage, even as it took on progressively higher positions in national leadership? Would it finally arrive at a point of crisis where it needed to behave in adult ways, but where its mindset pulled it backward into childishness? At that point, would it sink into a paralysis of irresponsibility and self-justification?

One thing is sure: We'll have plenty of opportunity to investigate the way our generation handled this hurricane. Katrina shattered lots of things. One of them is the myth that leaders can express moral courage in times of crisis without ever having learned how to take moral risks in times of normalcy.