

When the Pollsters Missed a Revolution

It's one thing to misread polling data in a close presidential contest, as happened with Mitt Romney's team in the last election. It's another to read things so wrongly that you miss an imminent revolution. Yet this is exactly what happened in the early 1960s.

You've probably heard the saying, "If you remember the 60s, you weren't there," a saying that can only be understood fully if you were there, as I was.

Raised in a conservative Jewish home on Long Island, the highlight of my 13th year (which was in 1968) was not my bar mitzvah, which was more of a social event than a spiritual event because of my nominal Jewish upbringing. Rather, it was seeing Jimi Hendrix in concert at the New York Philharmonic.

Now that was an experience. (For good reason, his band was named the Jimi Hendrix Experience.)

One year later, I was smoking pot and using LSD, and by the age of 15, I was shooting heroin and other drugs before having a life-changing experience at the age of 16.

Without knowing it at the time, I was the product of two revolutions: the counterculture revolution and the Jesus revolution (also called the Jesus People Movement), both underway in full force in the 1960s and early 1970s.

So dramatic was the cultural shift because of the counterculture revolution that author David G. Meyers, writing in 2000, raised the question: If you had you fallen asleep in 1960 and awakened today (even after the recent uptick in several indicators of societal health) would you feel pleased at the cultural shift? He then pointed out you would be

awakening to a:

- Doubled divorce rate
- Tripled teen suicide rate
- Quadrupled rate of reported violent crime
- Quintupled prison population
- Sextupled (no pun intended) percent of babies born to unmarried parents
- Sevenfold increase in cohabitation (a predictor of future divorce)
- Soaring rate of depression—to 10 times the pre-World War II level by one estimate

(Adapted from his book *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*.)

All of this has been familiar to me (and many others) for decades. But what I didn't know until recently was that the pollsters did not see this youth rebellion movement coming, a movement marked by the proverbial sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll (plus some Eastern religion thrown in). In fact, their analysis of the social data pointed in the exact opposite direction.

I learned of this through a fascinating book by Larry Eskridge, *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America*. (Dr. Eskridge has been on the staff of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College since 1988.)

According to Eskridge, "Going into the 1960s, there was little indication of the cultural turmoil that would swarm around a sizable segment of the Baby Boom generation later in the decade. In fact, if the experts were to be believed, the rising generation of adults-to-be appeared to fit in quite nicely with their elders' values and expectations. That was certainly the thrust of a late-1961 survey of American youth by pollsters George Gallup and Evan Hill. ... Their research

indicated that American teenagers were happy with their world, if not downright complacent.”

What exactly did the polls reveal?

According to Gallup and Hill, “The typical American youth shows few symptoms of frustration and is most unlikely to rebel or involve himself in crusades of any kind.”

This is utterly remarkable.

Yes, “The typical youth demonstrated ‘little spirit of adventure’; most simply wanted ‘a little ranch house, an inexpensive new car, a job with a large company, and a chance to watch TV each evening after the smiling children are asleep in bed.’”

And these young people were quite religious: “More than 75% firmly believed in God, and nearly two-thirds believed that the Bible was ‘completely true.’”

Eskridge further notes, “Gallup and Hill’s findings were very similar to those put forth in a 1962 article by Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons. ‘The general orientation,’ he said of American teenagers, appeared to be ‘an eagerness ... to accept higher orders of respectability’ and a ‘readiness to work within the system.’”

In retrospect, these observations seem almost comical, but this is how the younger generation appeared to be in 1962—and even beyond.

As Eskridge explains, “Two years later, [Parsons] found the situation to be much the same. Indeed, he believed that youth were generally becoming more conservative and, perhaps most important, seemed more amenable to adult control. Parsons’s sentiments were echoed in a statement by one university administrator who opined in the early 1960s that ‘employers will love this generation. ... They are going to be easy to

handle.'"

Yes, that generation which, within a few years, would be in full-scale rebellion (think "Generation Gap"), burning draft cards, gathering in droves for the Summer of Love in San Francisco, creating havoc at the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968, and celebrating a mass orgy of the aforementioned sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll at Woodstock (not to mention embracing radical feminism and participating in the Stonewall Riots and the beginning of the gay liberation movement)—that generation was deemed "happy with their world, if not downright complacent," showing "few symptoms of frustration" and being "unlikely to rebel or involve [themselves] in crusades of any kind," demonstrating "little spirit of adventure" and being content to pursue the American dream.

Yes, the young generation of the 1960s was eager "to accept higher orders of respectability" and demonstrated a "readiness to work within the system." Certainly, "They are going to be easy to handle."

How incredible it is to read these words with the benefit of hindsight.

All of which goes to show that radical, cultural shifts can come virtually out of nowhere, as did the Jesus People Movement as well, turning many of the radical rebels of the counterculture revolution into committed, biblical conservatives.

Perhaps some unexpected changes are coming to our culture as well? Perhaps all the negative predictions we hear about where this current generation is going with regard to family and sexuality will prove just as false a generation from now?

Stranger things have happened.

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