



South Dakotan Tom Brokaw, 75, is typically credited with coining the term “The Greatest Generation.” These are the selfless men and women who were raised in the Great Depression, came of age then and during WWII where they fought and supported the Allied war effort mightily. They went on to build the juggernaut that was post-war industrial America during perhaps tremendous years of growth. “The Best We Ever Had,” I called them in a 2013 column: in round numbers some 30 million Americans born between 1910 and 1930.

As Brokaw’s book “The Greatest Generation” makes clear, these remarkable people ran the gamut in society. A few became famous, but far too many died far too young. One iconic member was President John F. Kennedy, born in 1917 in Brookline, MA to Joseph and Rose Kennedy. At the core of how we came to have such an incredible surge of thirty million collective world beaters is the transmission of values. The President’s case was representative if not typical. Joe Kennedy achieved great wealth but remained dedicated to family values and extremely hard work. His biographer David Nasaw notes that he “never scolded or spanked, seldom raised his voice, was patient and generous. His only requirements were that [his children] be courteous, watch out for one another, and always be on time” (“**The Patriarch**,” Penguin: 2013). To me, that means elevating civility, teamwork, and reliability.

His son Jack reflected those values well beyond the call of duty, not only as a war hero while a young Navy lieutenant but later in political life. As Nasaw writes, “The congressman pushed himself and his aides relentlessly. They marveled at his stamina, his unflappable affability, his ability to connect with audiences. His back still bothered him—and would for the rest of his life—but it didn’t stop him or slow him down.”

President Kennedy famously beseeched his fellow Americans, in his inaugural address, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” He was talking not just to those who had been dealt one of the worst hands in history and played it magnificently: nurses, medics and corpsmen overwhelmed with casualties in miserable places;

production workers on the home front who toiled long shifts in defense plants; merchantmen who braved enemy submarines; children collecting scrap metal for the war effort; mothers who struggled without enough clothes or nutritious food for their children; soldiers, sailors and airmen who often came home too scarred to talk about their experiences. He was talking to all of us.

The Greatest Generation gave way in a tectonic shift to the Baby Boomers, the creative, antsy and sometimes self-absorbed generational bedrock of modern America. Today the U.S. seems to be home to the angriest swaths of society since the late 1960s. As *Time*'s Joe Klein notes, "We seem a perpetually unhappy place, filled with bilious voters." Who have legitimate deep concerns about terrorism, climate change and shaky worldwide economic growth. And the major political parties seem hostile toward each other, increasingly headed in opposite directions.

This widening gap is fueled by an often poorly informed electorate. Example? [A recent Pew Research Center survey](#)

illustrates that large segments of the public know little about how federal funds are spent. Only one in five realizes that the federal government spends more money on Social Security than on foreign aid, transportation, and interest on the government debt. Fully 33% believe that foreign aid is the biggest item on this list. Actually it is the smallest, accounting for only 1% of the federal budget. Another example? A

recent poll conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center

found that only 38% of Americans know that the Republican Party currently controls the House of Representatives. Barely one third of Americans can identify their congressional representative.

Scholars find that many U.S. citizens don't have basic political information and don't hold consistent opinions on policy matters.

This can be discouraging. But maybe we should temper our uneasiness over the anger, ignorance and horrifying news that are so frequently on display. Why? News programs often end with an uplifting segment focused on hometown heroes reminiscent of The Greatest Generation. *The Week* magazine routinely includes an upbeat section dedicated to positive trends and events, headlined "It Wasn't So Bad." And 2015 actually witnessed substantial continued progress. Violent crime decreased from 2014, unemployment is down, a new vaccine may wipe out Ebola, global literacy rates and life expectancy continue to climb. Smart phones anyone? Google? Shopping on Amazon? Endless new apps? The Boston Globe's Jeff Jacoby notes that humans are "hardwired for pessimism" but "these really are the good old days. Next year will be even better."

Which brings me to CBS's Emmy winning reality show, "Undercover Boss." Each episode involves a medium-large company's senior executives—often the CEO—performing routine jobs within their own organizations, across several locations and job functions. And in disguise, with lots of wigs and funky outfits-- often to their families' delight. The objective is for them to gain a competitive advantage by identifying opportunities to improve business processes—customer service or sales, for example—and thereby boost their company's bottom line. On the surface, it sounds like case studies in an MBA class. But the real treat for viewers is getting a kaleidoscopic look into the inner workings of factories and service industries and the employees who make them hum. Or in some cases, croak.

Recent shows have included companies in the food industry (e.g., Nestle Toll House Cookie Café) and retail (Shoppers World). But in diverse organizations across the country, one is confronted week after week with... lo and behold... what sure looks something like another greatest generation. Let's say the CEO puts on his company's uniform and begins to serve up (often clumsily) fast food. Or load a delivery truck, drive a forklift or pick out customer orders in a warehouse. Or make icing for the CEO's cookie line. We hear the heart rending stories of poorly trained employees who are forced to work two or even three jobs to make ends meet, who are taking care of aging parents or chronically sick children and those with special needs. Remarkably, employees volunteer gritty personal information to their presumed co-worker with little prompting.

Many of the executives are visibly moved by their employees' job stress, daily struggles and inner fortitude. Their voices shake during the debriefing sessions when their true identities are revealed, tears often flow. Frequently, they put their money where their mouths are and provide substantial cash, vacations, educational opportunities and other benefits to not only provide immediate relief but to improve overall working conditions and processes such as software programs and feedback mechanisms. The recipients radiate appreciation. More tears. Lots of hugs.

The Greatest Generation earned Mr. Brokaw's accolade in spades. But before we long too fervently for the good old days of these (literal) free world savers—and every generation seems to harken back-- we might take a moment to notice that their pretty wonderful descendants excel all around us. American ideals may have gone undercover to some extent, but the disguise is pretty flimsy and easy enough to look beyond. Are we talking "Ask not" 2.0? Pass those cookies, folks.

Undercover America

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