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American Sociological Review, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Jun., 1989), 359-381.

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GENERATIONS AND COLLECTIVE MEMORIES*

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A national sample of adult Americans was asked to report "the national or world events or changes over the past 50 years" that seemed to them especially important, and then to explain the reasons for their choices. The resulting data are used both quantitatively and qualitatively to explore hypotheses related to generational effects, life course, and collective memory. Broadly speaking, different cohorts recall different events or changes, and these memories come especially from adolescence and early adulthood. The reasons for mentioning various events and changes also differ across cohorts in ways that indicate that generational effects are the result of the intersection of personal and national history.

That each generation receives a distinctive imprint from the social and political events of its youth is an old idea, most often associated today with the name of Karl Mannheim. Mannheim ([1928] 1952) did not define generation with any precision, and in fact he emphasized that a generation is a social creation rather than a biological necessity. Where novel events are rare and change is slow, as in traditional peasant societies, distinct generations may not appear (1952, p. 309). Only where events occur in such a manner as to demarcate a cohort in terms of its "historical-social" consciousness, should we speak of a true generation.¹

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Philip E. Converse contributed in important ways to the development of the research on which this study is based. An early draft benefited substantially from critical readings by Margaret Braungart, Avshalom Caspi, Margaret Somers, and Arland Thornton. We also received helpful suggestions from Tom W. Smith, Barry Schwartz, John Mueller, Abby Stewart, Michael Kennedy, Frederick Weil, and Shoshana Colman. The article is based on research supported by the National Science Foundation (SES-8410078).

Copies of the data on which this article is based (text records of interview responses and coded variables, with documentation) can be obtained from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, P.O. Box 1248, University Of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

¹ We will use the term *cohort* descriptively to refer to "the aggregate of individuals (within some population definition) who experienced the same

Although Mannheim emphasized the socially constructed nature of a generation, implicit in his discussion was also the concept of "life course." His essay is not entirely clear on the point at which a cohort begins to develop a unique generational character, but he seems to specify "the age of 17, sometimes a little earlier and sometimes a little later" (Mannheim 1952, p. 300). He further suggests that age 25 may well mark the terminal point of major generational formation. Thus Mannheim assumed, as have almost all later writers, that "late adolescence and early adulthood are the formative years during which a distinctive personal outlook on politics emerges" (Rintala 1968, p. 93).

Subsequent interest in the generational concept has been motivated largely by a belief in its potential explanatory power for understanding individual and collective political behavior. In simplest terms, the generational character created by the events a cohort experiences during its youth is assumed to exert an important, even decisive, influence

event within the same time interval" (Ryder 1965, p. 845), but treat *cohort effect* and *generation* as having the additional implication of long-lasting, if not permanent, change in the cohort. In Mannheim's usage, generation has the still further implication of ideological distinctiveness, whereas a cohort effect can include social or demographic changes that may or may not have direct ideological effects (e.g., see the illustrations offered by Riley, Foner, and Waring 1988, pp. 256-59). *Generation* is sometimes limited to lineage relations, but in this paper the wider meaning of the term is employed; see Cutler 1977, and for a concise discussion of this and other relevant distinctions, Knoke 1984.

on the later attitudes and actions of its members. An analogy to effects from social class was developed by Mannheim and is often assumed by other writers attracted to the generational concept (e.g., Berger 1971).

Using generation as a variable to predict future behavior has met with mixed success in systematic, as distinct from anecdotal, reports. When samples are drawn of very specific generational activist groups—similar to but more narrowly defined than Mannheim's "generational units," which were conceived as two or more antagonistic political movements—they do seem to carry some continuity of thought and action (e.g., Jennings 1987; Marwell, Aiken, and Demerath 1987). However, when cohorts are identified across a broader population, there is little evidence that past experiences have permanent ideological effects on later political attitudes or actions (e.g., Barnes 1972; Converse 1987; Holsti and Rosenau 1980; Weil 1987). Even when current political attitudes or behavior can be traced to a particular past period, the connection often extends over the entire population, or over a subpopulation defined in other than cohort terms (e.g., by race or gender or religion).

However, the attempt to go directly from the formal delineation of cohorts in terms of age to the prediction of later behavior skips an important step: that of identifying what earlier experience is carried forward in memory by a particular cohort. The possibility of unconscious cohort effects must also be admitted, and in fact Mannheim's discussion of the "natural world" of early childhood would allow for subtle cohort effects on taken-for-granted elemental social behaviors (e.g., the type described by Elias [1939] 1978). But the generational hypothesis emphasized by Mannheim and most others, and the one explored here, is of experience from adolescence and early adulthood that is carried forward with at least some self-awareness. Thus the belief that the Depression generation will be frugal or the Vietnam generation wary of foreign military intervention usually assumes memories that are at least partly conscious.

In our research we focused directly on the formative events and changes that cohorts are assumed to have experienced in the past and to carry with them into the present. We ask whether there are memories that distinguish one cohort from another, and whether cohorts defined initially in arbitrary age terms can be

redefined generationally by the qualitatively distinct events and changes that are currently predominant in memory (Rosow 1978). This then is a study of the collective political and societal memories of a cross-section sample of the American population, and our initial hypothesis is that these memories will be structured along the age dimension in ways that point to important cohort effects. We will also explore possible interactions between generational effects and major stratification variables (education, race, and gender), since it is possible that effects are limited to or magnified in certain social divisions of the population (Rosow 1978).

Operationally, we work backwards and first determine in an open-ended way the main "national or world events or changes" remembered as important from the past 50 years by the American population. Next we consider whether the age patterning of particular memories is consistent with the hypothesis of generational effects and, if so, whether the patterning points to one or more age ranges where there is maximum impact of events. Finally, as explained further below, we attempt to go beyond the nominal events and changes that are remembered to their meanings for the individuals holding them, in order to determine whether these meanings are also connected to cohort. In all of these inquiries, we deliberately focus on the half century preceding our date of inquiry (1985), so that we have a period that coincides with the lives of a large part of the population, but also includes years that preceded the lives of a significant part of the sample as well (i.e., those younger than 50 will not have been alive during part of the period).

A more specific hypothesis tested is that the events and changes that have maximum impact in terms of memorableness occur during a cohort's adolescence and young adulthood, often referred to as "youth." There are three types of consideration that point to this period as the critical one for generational effects. First and most obviously, we assume that people will tend *not* to recall as important those events and changes that preceded their own lifetime. As Mannheim ([1928] 1952, p. 296) stated it, only knowledge "personally gained in real situations . . . sticks," and thus even very important political events and changes that preceded one's life should not have registered very clearly. Halbwachs ([1950] 1980) makes

a similar point in distinguishing between autobiographical and historical memory, the former richer and more personally meaningful than the latter, and recent evidence on the attitude-behavior connection provides further indirect support for the importance of direct experience (Fazio 1985).

Second, although by elementary school age, children are fairly well developed in terms of language and other abilities, there is considerable evidence that they have only a very superficial grasp of the political world beyond their family and other personal relationships (Gallatin 1980). Apparently an awareness of larger political events and changes does not appear until early adolescence (Sigel and Hoskin 1977). The extent to which this is largely a result of intellectual maturation (e.g., Inhelder and Piaget 1958), of psychosocial development of personal identities (Erikson 1968), or of changes in social expectations and opportunities (White and Siegel 1984), is a matter of dispute; but consistent with Mannheim's assumption, developmental psychologists view youth as a kind of "critical period" for learning about the larger society, almost in the same sense that earlier years are critical for other developmental tasks, for example, the acquisition of language (Braungart 1984).

Third, we expect that most people will tend *not* to recall as important those events and changes that occur after their early adulthood. The events that register most strongly during adolescence and early adulthood have the great advantage of primacy, and research in experimental settings suggests that primacy effects are especially strong on impression formation (Markus and Zajonc 1985). Moreover, primacy should be much more important in the life course than in standard laboratory experiments, since striking political events that occur during adolescence or early adulthood are primary in a more fundamental sense, both disrupting the taken-for-granted natural world of childhood and providing an induction into the larger political and social world. In Mannheim's view there is a "fresh" encounter with the political world at that point that can seldom be duplicated in later life. More dramatically, Davis (1979, p. 102) speaks of noteworthy historic events during adolescence that rip "the larger existential fabric of our being-in-the-world," and thus leave an indelible impression in memory. (Recency effects also tend to occur

with memory, and we attempt to assess this possibility as well in our research design—see below, note 2.)

The hypotheses stated thus far focus on the importance of a critical period in the life course for creating the possibility of generational effects. However, both the "objective" importance of events and the particular interests of individuals are likely to modify life course factors and lead to some events being seen as important by persons who were not adolescents or young adults at the time. For example, the magnitude of World War II, even though learned secondhand from books or parents, may compete strongly with youthful experience during the Vietnam War in determining memorableness. However, even in cases where the surface memory of an event does not vary by age, we hypothesize that the *meaning* of the event will nevertheless be different for different cohorts. As Mannheim suggested, those from an older generation are likely to interpret the event in terms of their previously well developed view of the world. Likewise, those too young to have experienced the event firsthand should interpret it in terms of the world they themselves experienced during their own adolescence. Thus, we are interested not only in collective memories of events and changes, but also in the interpretive content of those memories as a further possible factor in generational differences.

In summary, our paper reports investigations of three closely connected hypotheses. First, after identifying in an open-ended manner major collective memories about the past half century, we test whether these memories are structured by age in a way that points clearly to generational differences. Second, if such generational effects occur, we ask whether they fit the model of adolescence and early adulthood as the primary source of political and social memories. Third, we compare the meaning of such youthful memories with those that occur from other periods of the life course, with the expectation that even the latter memories can best be understood by taking into account the adolescent and early adult experiences of the rememberers.

In describing our investigation as one dealing with "collective memories," we make use of a term advanced by Halbwachs ([1950] 1980) to describe memories of a shared past that are retained by members of a group, large

or small, that experienced it. The concept is both suggestive and difficult to specify clearly. Initially, we use it to refer to shared memories of societal-level events, but in our concluding section we draw on our results to distinguish among several possible meanings of "collective memories." We will also at that point discuss what our findings about memories of the past suggest about the value of distinguishing "generations" in order to predict current and future social actions.

METHOD AND DATA

We pursued these ideas in 1985 by asking a probability sample of 1,410 Americans, 18 years and older, to think of "national or world events or changes" that have occurred over the past 50 years and to name "one or two . . . that seem to you to have been especially important." Both "events" and "changes" were always mentioned together, since we wished to include both time-bound occurrences and more general social movements or changes, and each respondent was encouraged to give two such events or changes. (The full question is presented in the footnote to Table 1.) We then asked each respondent why he or she chose each event or change, as discussed at a later period.²

In evaluating our hypotheses we draw on graphic presentations of memories by age (and implicitly by cohort), on logistic analyses using age and three stratification variables (education, race, and gender) for purposes of

control, comparison, and tests of interactions, and on content analysis of explanations of memories, which can help us see more clearly the different perspectives on the past that people have.

MAJOR EVENTS AND CHANGES MENTIONED AS IMPORTANT

The half century marked off by the period of approximately 1930 to 1985 was a momentous one for the United States. It included three major wars, important movements to effect changes in race and gender relations, the development of nuclear weapons, repeated acts of political terrorism abroad and assassination at home, and . . . One could go on and on. Certainly it was a half century full of both specific events and broader changes that might be remembered by Americans. Our initial interest is in which ones are remembered as important. (Although we will use words like "recall" and "remember," some respondents who mention an early event or change will be too young to have experienced it personally; what is presumably remembered is having heard or read about it.)

World War II and Vietnam are clearly the most frequently recalled events or changes from the past five decades, as shown in Table 1, with 29 percent and 22 percent, respectively, mentioning one or the other of these two wars.³ Along with the two wars, we will include in our primary analysis the next listed 10 events and changes as well. Six of these were mentioned by more than 5 percent of the sample: space exploration, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, civil rights, the nuclear threat, advances in communication and trans-

² Our questions were asked as part of a random-digit-dial telephone survey during four months (April, May, August, September) of 1985. The break between May and August was deliberate, in order to determine whether either recent events or commemorations of earlier events affected our findings about the past; small but statistically significant increases occur for two categories (civil rights and nuclear weapons), but in these and all other cases the results for relations to age are similar in the two seasons. (The increase for nuclear weapons was probably due to media commemorations of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima 40 years earlier on August 6; no similar explanation is apparent for the rise in civil rights mentions.) The main response rate for the four telephone surveys was 71 percent and another 4 percent broke off the interview before reaching our 20-minute set of questions, which occurred in the middle of a longer questionnaire dealing with consumer attitudes unrelated to our section.

³ The base for percentages in the first column in Table 1 is the 1,253 respondents who mentioned at least one event or change in answer to our question. (We deal below with the 157 respondents included in our sample who were unable to mention any event or change but who answered other questions that were part of our study.) In the last column the same base of 1,253 is used, but the percentage in each row is for those who mentioned each event, whether as a first mention or a second mention, as against all those who did not mention the event. For example, 29.3 percent of the 1,253 respondents mentioned World War II and 70.7 percent did not mention it. The percentages in this last column are not mutually exclusive, since those who gave two responses appear in two categories. Thus the column does not add to 100 percent.

Table 1. Highly Mentioned Events and Changes

Event	% 1st Mention	Number 1st Mention	Number 2nd Mention	Combined Number	% of Respondents Mentioning ^a
* World War II	21.3%	267	100	367	29.3
* Vietnam War	11.6	145	131	276	22.0
* Space exploration	7.4	93	66	159	12.7
* Kennedy assassination	5.0	63	48	111	8.8
* Civil rights	6.1	77	30	107	8.5
* Nuclear war, threat of	4.5	56	42	98	7.8
* Communication/transportation	3.7	46	31	77	6.1
* Depression	4.6	58	12	70	5.6
* Computers	1.8	23	26	49	3.9
* Terrorism	1.5	19	24	43	3.4
* Moral decline	2.9	28	13	41	3.3
* Women's rights	1.6	20	17	37	3.0
Reagan's presidency	1.6	20	15	35	2.8
Nixon (Watergate)	0.7	9	26	35	2.8
Inflation	1.6	20	14	34	2.7
Medical advances	1.1	14	19	33	2.6
Social security	1.8	23	6	29	2.3
Nuclear power	1.2	15	14	29	2.3
Unemployment problems	1.2	15	11	26	2.1
Korean War	1.0	12	14	26	2.1
War in general	1.0	13	11	24	1.9
Soviet Union, Cold War	1.0	12	9	21	1.7
World hunger	1.1	14	6	20	1.6
Education, better/worse	1.0	12	4	16	1.3
F.D. Roosevelt	0.9	11	5	16	1.3
Israel, creation of	0.7	9	4	13	1.0
Peace movement	0.6	8	5	13	1.0
Farm problems	0.6	7	5	12	1.0
Middle East	0.4	5	7	12	1.0
Central America	0.6	7	4	11	.9
Economic improvement	0.6	7	3	10	.8
Immigration	0.5	6	4	10	.8
Miscellaneous	9.5	119	96	201	16.0
Total	100.0%	1253	840	—	—
Base N	(1253)				(1253)

* Major events and changes.

^a Each row represents a dichotomy of those mentioning the event at all divided by the total ($N=1253$) mentioning any event.

Event/Change Question

The next questions concern how people think about the past. There have been a lot of national and world events and changes over the past 50 years—say, from about 1930 right up until today. Would you mention one or two such events or changes that seem to you to have been *especially* important. There aren't any right or wrong answers to the question—just whatever *national or world events or changes* over the past 50 years that come to mind as important to you.

(IF ONLY ONE MENTION, ASK: Is there any other national or world event or change over the past 50 years that you feel was especially important?)

portation, and the 1930s Depression. In addition, we include the next four most frequent mentions; although not quite making the 5 percent threshold, they are close to it and all are of considerable intrinsic interest—the development of the computer, terrorism (mainly the 1979 hostage-taking in Iran), moral decline, and women's rights.

Altogether, 82 percent of the 1253 respondents who were able to mention any event or

change mentioned at least one that fell into these 12 categories. We shall therefore concentrate our analysis on these "major" categories, which range from time-bound events such as World War II to broader changes like civil rights that are difficult to describe in terms of precise dates. Since there is a high correlation between an event or change being mentioned at all and its being mentioned first, our analysis will treat each

major category dichotomously: mentioned at all or not mentioned. Other analysis using only first mentions produces results for age generally quite consistent with what will be presented here (see Appendix A for first mentions by age).

The 12 major events and changes are listed in Table 1 in a straightforward way, but judgment is necessarily involved in creating and using such categories. Even a well-demarcated "event" such as World War II consisted of a complex series of more specific events (the attack on Pearl Harbor, the invasion of North Africa, the surrender of Germany, etc.), and the placement of these under the label "World War II" is an act of conceptualization, since historical reality is an undivided stream. In the case of World War II, the conceptualization is provided by the larger culture, and a reexamination of the 367 respondents coded into that category shows that 310 answered by using the exact words "World War II." However, we have also included within the category respondents whose answers referred to "Pearl Harbor," to "the end of World War II," or in a few cases to some other event that seemed to fit best there. Thus, even for the simplest event categories, some judgments were needed both in creating the code and in actual coding.

Other categories in Table 1 are less tightly constrained by specific dates and cultural definitions; for example, Women's Rights includes positive responses that refer to greater employment opportunities for women, positive references to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), mentions of the Women's Movement, and similar answers. In this case, more conceptualization was required on our part than was true for World War II. In our subsequent analysis we have tried to remain sensitive to variation within, as well as between, categories, and at points we will note tests carried out to make certain that the labels in Table 1 do not become so reified as to prevent discovery of important relationships at other levels of conceptualization.⁴

⁴ Coding was done by professional coders unaware of the specific hypotheses of the study. For the events and changes question, agreement between original and check-coders averaged 95 percent for this question. For the more complex coding of reasons why the events or changes were

Other events and changes. Before focusing on the 12 major categories, we briefly note three types of response that are not included among them. First, in Table 1 we show a number of specific categories that fall below the threshold for a major event or change yet are mentioned by at least 10 persons—the figure we used to admit a specific category into Table 1. None of these other categories seems frivolous or irrelevant to the question, and we omit them from our analysis because they are small in frequency and the task of dealing separately with each would become overwhelming.

Gathered together under "Miscellaneous" at the bottom of Table 1 are all other substantive responses given by those who answered the event/change question. These responses range from some not very different from the categories already included in the table (e.g., the Oil Crisis with nine responses just misses the threshold for separate listing) to a variety of more specialized or exotic answers (e.g., "Alaska became a state," "Cincinnati Reds won the World Series," "improvements in water and sewage," "Rock 'n Roll"). Such responses serve as a reminder that a random sample of Americans yields a vast variety of memories and concerns, and the last 50 years is viewed by members of the population in many diverse ways.

A third grouping that requires note is not represented at all in Table 1: the 157 individuals out of our total sample of 1,410 who answered other questions in our study but were unable (or conceivably unwilling) to mention even one event or change over the past 50 years that seemed important to them. By far the most powerful background factor that accounts for the lack of historical memory is education. Most of the people with no apparent memory of events or changes are located among those without college education: 17 percent of those with no college experience, as against 4 percent of those with any college experience at all.⁵

chosen, discussed at a later point, coder/check-coder agreement averaged 74 percent.

⁵ When education, age, race, and sex are included in a single logit analysis of failure to mention any event or change, education remains the clearest explanatory factor ($t=8.11, p<.001$), age shows no relation, and race (blacks) and sex (women) are both significantly related ($p<.05$) to not mentioning any event or change.

GENERATIONAL EFFECTS

Our first interest is in determining whether generation, operationalized in the form of age categories, helps explain mentions of events and changes as important in response to our initial question. The simplest form of the generational hypothesis—that people of all ages will tend to report events and changes from their youth—is supported remarkably well for the majority of the 12 major events and changes, as will be seen in Figures 1 to 5, to be discussed in detail. (The exact percentages that are graphed in Figures 1 to 5 are available on request.) The figures present bivariate relations between age and each major category, but the relations have also been tested using logistic regressions that included education, gender, and race; the results from such tests are reported in Table 2, both for control purposes and in order to provide comparisons of the sizes of the age effects with those attributable to the other three variables. In addition, since for events that occurred toward the middle of the 50-year period, the generational hypothesis about youth predicts curvilinearity, we regularly included in the logistic analysis a quadratic term for age. In no case do the controls for education, gender, and race alter substantially the main effect of age, and for most events on which age has a significant effect at all, it is the strongest of the predictors, often with both linear and curvilinear trends registering as significant. We also

explored interactions between age and education, gender, and race; the four such interactions discovered will be noted at later points.

Wars. We begin with two major wars in which the United States has been engaged over the past 50 years. Figure 1 shows that nominations of World War II as especially important are relatively high and sharply demarcated among those in their 50s and 60s in 1985. Nominations of the Vietnam War are high among those 18 to about 44, and especially among those in their 30s and early 40s, but decline rapidly at later ages.

If we transpose the present peak ages to the ages of the respondents at the beginning and end of each war, we find that the highest proportions of mentions occur as follows:

	<i>Beginning</i>	<i>End</i>
World War II (1941–1945):	16–20	20–24
Vietnam War (1965–1973):	15–19	23–27.

There is the clear beginning date of 1941 for World War II, and we use 1965 as the year in which the Vietnam War “could be considered as having started as far as the American public was concerned” (Mueller 1973, p. 37). The transposed peaks of 16 to 24 for World War II and of 15 to 27 for Vietnam are remarkably close to the 17 to 25 age range identified by Mannheim as critical for generational formation.

Whatever credence we give to these exact estimates, it is apparent from Figure 1 that memories are strongest for those in their

Table 2. Relations of Major Event/Change Categories and Age, Education, Gender, and Race: Significant *t*-Ratios^a

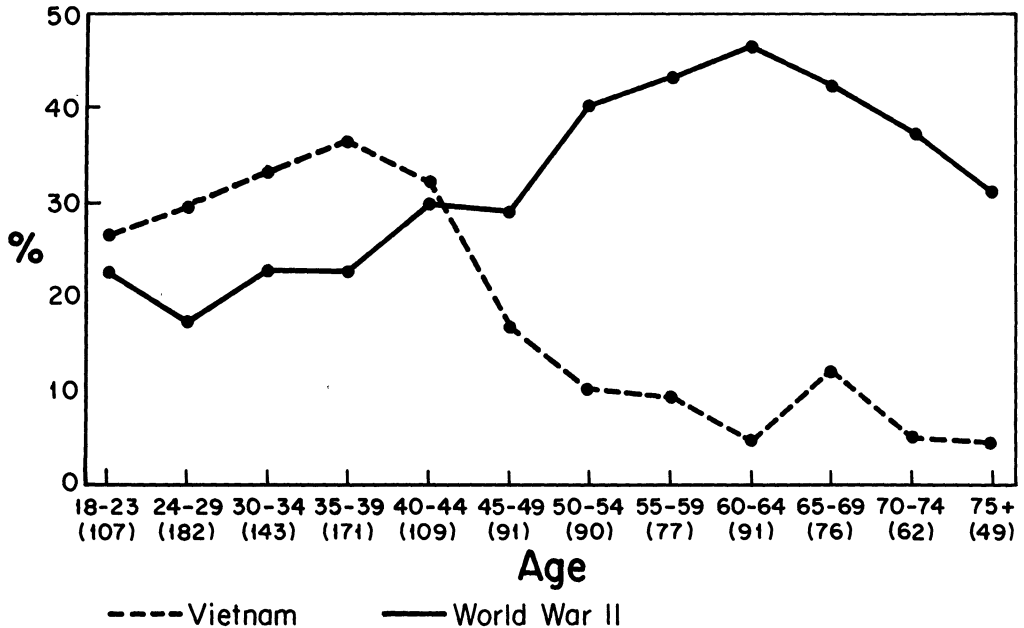
	World War II	Vietnam	Space	Civil Rights	Kennedy	Nuclear	Comm. & Transp.	Depression	Computers	Moral Decline	Terrorism	Women's Rights
Education	5.63	(1.89)	—	2.35	—	—	—	2.00	2.74	—	—	—
Gender	-3.12	—	—	—	2.27	-2.30	—	—	—	—	—	3.66
Race	-3.66	-3.70	(-1.90)	10.99	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Age (linear)	6.83	-8.26	—	- ^b	-3.65	-2.93	3.52	4.63	—	—	-4.08	-2.11 ^c
Age (squared)	(-1.68)	-3.82	—	- ^d	-4.52	—	—	2.22	—	—	(1.75)	—

^a Based on logistic analysis of each major event or change using four predictors: age (6 categories), education (6 categories), gender (1 = Men, 2 = Women), race (1 = White, 2 = Black). The cell figures are statistically significant ($p < .05$) *t*-ratios (coefficient/standard error), with those in parentheses of borderline significance ($.10 > p > .05$). Each analysis was done with and without an additional term for age squared to test for curvilinearity; if the age-squared term was not significant, results are shown only for the model omitting it. The sample size for these analyses was 1165, a number smaller than that for Table 1 because only whites and blacks are included for the race variable. Nominal two-tailed statistical significance levels for this table are: $t = 1.64, p < .10$; $t = 1.96, p < .05$; $t = 2.58, p < .01$; $t = 3.29, p < .001$.

^b The *t*-ratios for age for blacks and whites separately on Civil Rights are 2.42 and .27, respectively.

^c The *t*-ratios for men and women separately on Women's Rights are -.48 and -2.06, respectively.

^d The *t*-ratio for age squared for blacks on Civil Rights is -1.89.



Figures in parentheses are base N's.

Fig. 1. World War II and Vietnam Mentions by Age

youth at the time of the event. This finding arises, however, from two different sources. On the one hand, those now too young to have directly experienced a war during their adolescence (below age 50 in the case of World War II) are less likely to mention the event, presumably because it was simply not part of the world they knew personally. On the other hand, those who were beyond their youth at the time of an event—beyond present age 45 with reference to the Vietnam War—are also less likely to mention it, probably because it is overshadowed by earlier events that dominate their memories. We should emphasize that since respondents were encouraged to name two events or changes, the fact that a person mentioned World War II in no way precluded their mentioning Vietnam also. Yet of those 50 to 74 years in age who gave World War II and who gave one other event/change, only 11 percent mentioned Vietnam, a percentage essentially the same as the figure (12 percent) for those of the same age range who did not give World War II as one of their two mentions. Thus, it is not only that older people tend to remember World War II, but also that such people tend *not* to mention a war that occurred after their youth.

Other clearly datable events. Three other clearly datable categories are the Depression,

the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, and terrorism (consisting almost entirely of responses about the 1979 Iran hostage-taking and subsequent terrorist incidents). All three of these events show clear relations to age, as indicated in Figure 2.⁶

Not many respondents mention the Depression, but the modal age of those who do is in the 70s and over category, so that these people are even older than those mentioning World War II, as they should be according to the generational hypothesis. (However, because of small samples at the oldest ages, it is not practical to identify a highest age range for mentions in this case.)

John Kennedy's assassination is given especially by people now in their late 30s and their 40s, which means teens to early and mid-20s in 1963 when the assassination occurred. One might also expect still younger persons to mention this particular event because recognition and idealization of the president appears earlier than other political awareness (Greenstein 1965), and in addition

⁶ Note that the scale used for the ordinate in Figure 2 differs from that in Figure 1. We have set the scale to a 20 percent maximum for most of the figures, but Figures 1 and 4 require higher maximums.

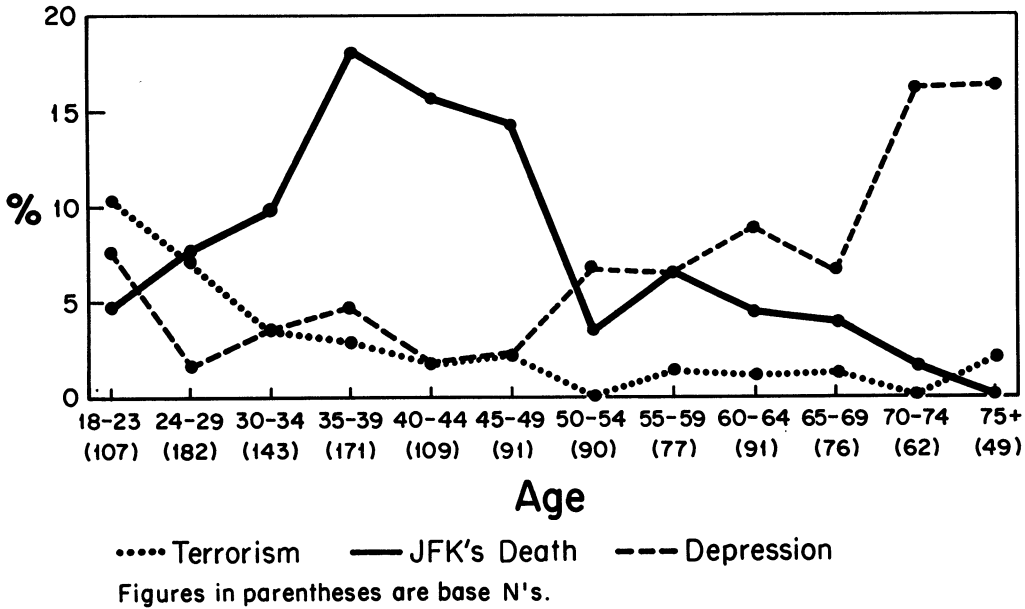


Fig. 2. Other Datable Events by Age: Depression, JFK's Death, and Terrorism

television brought the dramatic impact of Kennedy's assassination directly into most American homes. Although the peak age of mentions is by individuals who were 15 in 1963, persons then 8 to 12 years old are also relatively high in naming the assassination as important.

Finally, terrorist incidents, which captured public attention in late 1979 with the hostage-taking in Iran and continued into the 1980s, are mentioned most often by the youngest members of our sample—that is, by those who had not experienced most of the other major events and changes but who were at least entering their teens when the Iran hostage incident began. In sum, these three events, like the two major wars, are recalled most readily by those in a narrow age band of teens to middle 20s when each occurred.

Broader changes. Two changes less easy to connect with specific dates but nevertheless amenable to age-related interpretation are shown in Figure 3. First, advances in communication and transportation include mentions such as the development of radio and television and of the jet airplane. Not surprisingly, these are reported as important changes disproportionately by older Americans who witnessed such extraordinary advances in their own lifetimes. For younger Americans, television and jet planes are part of their natural world and not something to be remarked on.

One might have expected a somewhat similar relation of age to the category "nuclear war," since the initial impact of the atomic and hydrogen bomb developments go back to 1945 and 1950, respectively, and the 1950 date was also caught up in growing U.S./Soviet hostilities. However, Figure 3 shows almost the opposite: responses about nuclear war, which include both nuclear weapon developments and nuclear disarmament talks (but not nuclear power), are associated with younger ages. Our interpretation here cannot be as straightforward in terms of simple age-related experience as for previous categories, but it is likely that a general increase in concern over nuclear destruction over the recent past is responsible in part for this age effect. Various antinuclear movements gained considerable ground in the years just preceding 1985, and these both result from and have further raised national consciousness on the nuclear issue. Thus, to the extent that the issue has been reborn as a new one, like all new issues it has impressed the young most of all, if only because it does not compete in their minds with "old" events and changes. From this perspective, mentions of nuclear weapons are similar to mentions of terrorism. In addition, however, it seems possible that there is a life cycle effect also, in that it is the young who will be particularly anxious about growing up in a world, and bringing children into a world, that may be

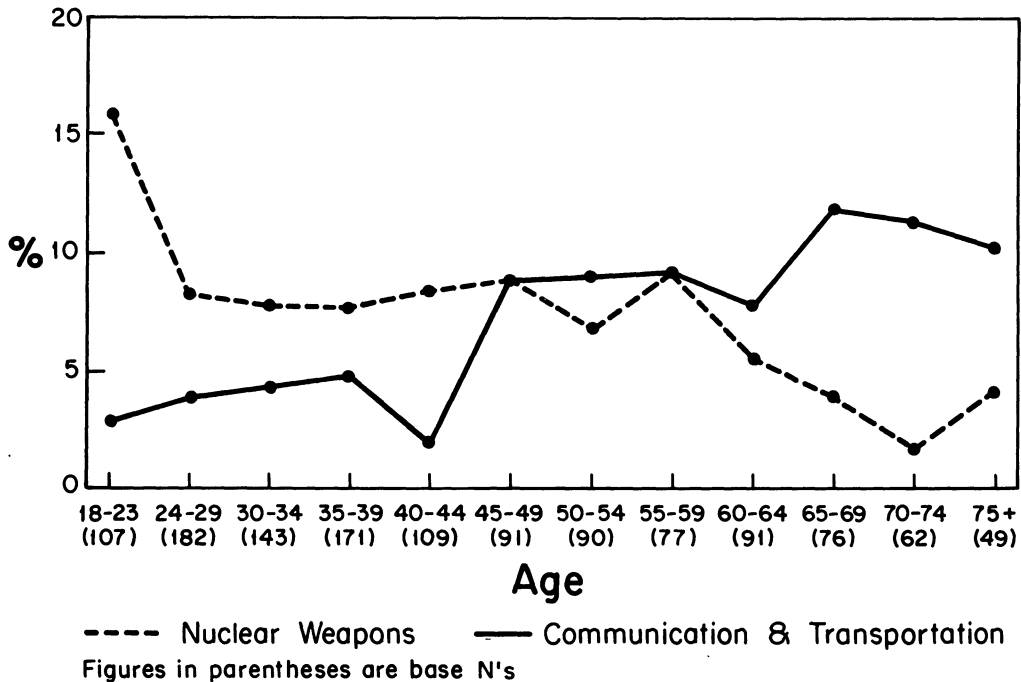


Fig. 3. Other Changes by Age: Nuclear, Communication and Transportation

destroyed by nuclear war. Older people are probably less concerned about such apocalyptic visions because their worries center on aging and illness, the loss of loved ones, and other more personal harbingers of mortality (Bengston and Black 1973).⁷

Civil rights and women's rights. For these two social changes, it is only the group most directly affected—blacks and women, respectively—who show a clear relation to age (see Figures 4 and 5, which use only six age breaks because of the smaller *N*s when racial and gender subsamples are graphed). On civil rights, it is older blacks who are most likely to offer civil rights as important (although not the very oldest if the small case base of blacks 70 and over can be trusted). The drop among younger blacks can readily be attributed to the lack of recent civil rights activities, since they

were too young to experience the height of such activity in the 1954–1965 period. (The generally high levels of mentions among blacks at all ages no doubt reflect the breadth of impact across the black population of the civil rights movement.) It is difficult to explain the null age relationship for whites, especially since the proportion of whites mentioning civil rights (5.2 percent) would place it fairly high in Table 1 even with black respondents omitted. We have no satisfactory interpretation of the puzzling absence of an age trend in this case.

In the case of women's rights, the number of mentions by men is so small ($n=5$) that the lack of an age relation does not merit speculation. The number of mentions by women is also not large ($n=32$), but there is a marginally significant relation to age ($p<.05$), with younger women more likely to mention the women's movement or associated responses, readily understandable in terms of its more recent origin as compared with the civil rights movement. The unusual nonlinearity beyond age 49 must be interpreted with caution (neither a quadratic nor a cubic term is significant in the logistic regression); however, it is worth noting that women now in their 60s were in their 20s during World War II, a point at which women were briefly encouraged to move into male occupations,

⁷ A Gallup Poll (1982, p. 168) found a large age difference in 1981 in the percentage of Americans favoring the proposal that "every new house in the United States be required to have a bomb shelter, with the federal government paying most of the costs": 47 percent of those 18–29, 37 percent of those 30–49, and 27 percent of those 50 and over. Similar age trends occur in Gallup's "most important problem" question for the code category "fear of war/international tensions" (*The Gallup Report*, 1987, 260, pp. 6–7).

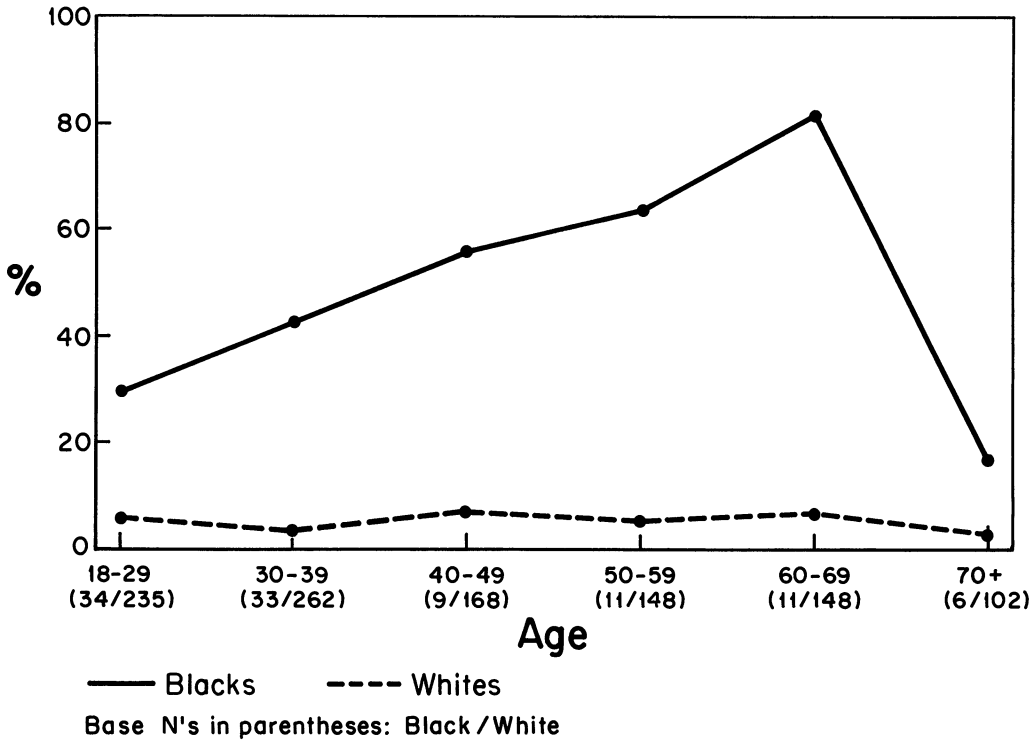


Fig. 4. Civil Rights by Age and Race

while the women now in their 50s who do not mention women's rights at all were maturing during the postwar period that emphasized mar-

riage, motherhood, and homemaking (see also Stewart and Healy 1989, on the era of the "feminine mystique").

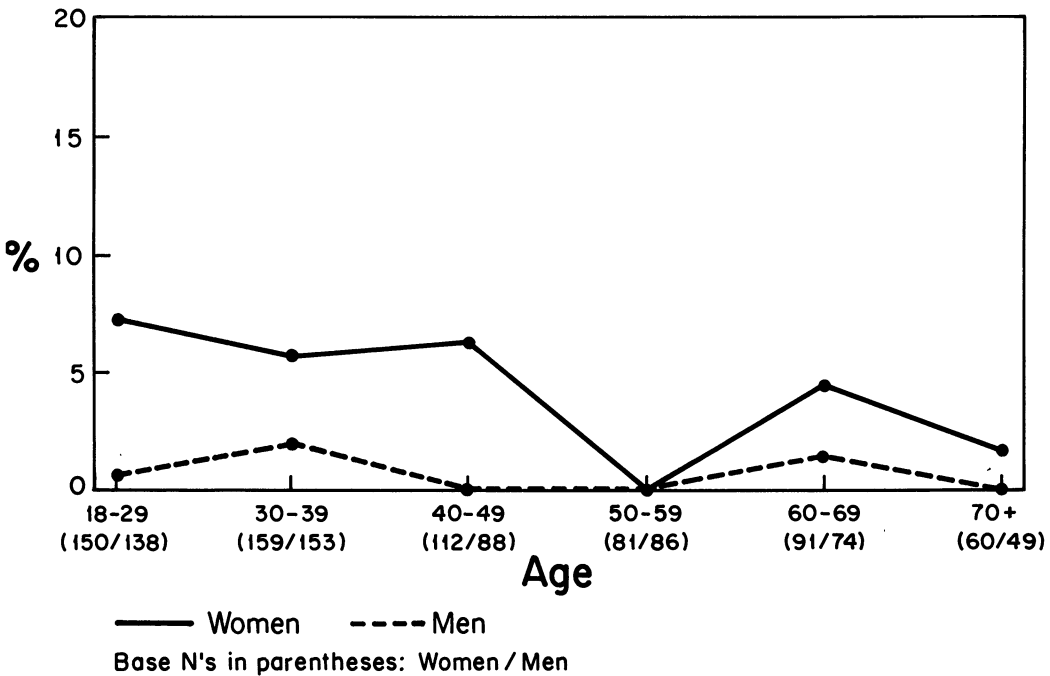


Fig. 5. Women's Rights by Age and Gender

Space exploration and the development of computers. Next we turn to two types of scientific change that might have been expected to be related to age—especially for those who associate technological innovation with youth (e.g., Ryder 1965)—but are not. (The absence of relations to age holds not only for the sample as a whole, but for such major sample components as high- and low-educated respondents.) We thought that in the case of space exploration this might be due to the heterogeneous content of the category, and therefore carried out a separate analysis that focused on only those respondents (49 out of 159) who specifically mentioned man's first landing on the moon in 1969. Despite our successful isolation of this specific event, as starkly dramatic on television as was the assassination of President Kennedy six years earlier, there is not a hint of any relation to age.

Mentions of the computer also show no sign of a relation to age. In this case there is no single dramatic point in time, but we are able to separate the sample into those who, to a later question, report having used a computer in some way (41 percent of our total sample) and those reporting no use (59 percent): neither set of respondents shows any relation of mentions of computers to age, and indeed there is only an insignificant trend for those who have used computers to mention them as important more frequently than do non-computer users. (However, there is other evidence that in the case of computers the open question may not have adequately encouraged spontaneous mentions; see Schuman and Scott 1987.)

The fact that so many events and changes are related clearly and meaningfully to age suggests that we ought to take seriously the absence of such a relationship for space exploration and for computers. Apparently people at all ages attend more or less equally to space exploits—the third most highly mentioned category in Table 1—and all ages must also have been influenced at least vaguely by the emergence on the scene of the computer. Perhaps for the old, these nonpolitical categories do not face interference from earlier events such as World War II, while at the same time the continuing exploits in each area prevent the young from taking either for granted. However, when we come to the reasons that people give for mentioning space

exploration, we will see that cohorts do differ in their perception of the same event.

Moral decline. The category Moral Decline is different in character from all other political and technological changes discussed thus far. It covers a variety of responses referring to crime, abortion, drugs, sexual promiscuity, alcohol, loss of religion, or other similar problems. Since in many instances respondents mentioned several together, or themselves used a general term like "moral decline," we created a single category with this label. It seemed likely that such concerns would be voiced more often by older or at least middle-aged Americans, but surprisingly, there is no sign of such a relation overall. A plausible interpretation is that a rising concern with such issues as abortion and drugs has affected the young in a way that balances the presumed tendency for older people to be troubled over a more general long-term change in values from the era in which they grew up. If purely present concerns (e.g., "too much use of drugs and sex") are separated out from those that make an explicit contrast with the past (e.g., "the growing lack of religious respect among the younger people"), the trend is for the former to be given by younger respondents and the latter by older respondents (gammas of $-.20$ and $+.25$, respectively, in the associations with age). The number of cases, however, is too small for this finding to be more than suggestive and the interaction of age by mention (past versus present concern) is not significant ($p > .10$).

Other Background Factors: Education, Gender, Race

Our presentation has focused on the bivariate relations of age to memories of events and changes. Not only are these relations maintained when education, gender, and race are included in the logistic regressions reported in Table 2, but age is the most frequent and for most memories the strongest predictor in the table. Some of the other predictors may be of independent interest (e.g., World War II is mentioned more often by highly educated than by less educated respondents), but extended comment on these taken alone is not relevant to our present concern with generational effects. Furthermore, in none of the 12 cases does education interact significantly with age in yielding memories of events, and

in only two instances each do race and gender produce such interactions. Only blacks show an age relation to mentions of civil rights, as noted in connection with Figure 4, and in addition only whites show the relation for mentions of Vietnam presented in Figure 1, perhaps because of black preoccupation with civil rights during much the same years. Only women show the age relation to women's rights, as noted in connection with Figure 5; and moral decline is mentioned more by older women ($\gamma = .23$) and by younger men ($-.34$), but this difference is too close to borderline in significance to justify speculative interpretation here. In sum, age is clearly the most general predictor of memories for events and changes over the past 50 years, and the graphing of the age relations provides strong evidence that in all or almost all such cases, age represents cohort effects, which in turn have their origins in adolescence and early adulthood.

THE REASONS FOR MENTIONING EVENTS AND CHANGES

Although our search for connections between cohorts and remembered events has been generally successful, even where such differences are sharpest there are always a fair number of people outside the modal cohorts who nevertheless mention an event or change as especially important to them. For example, although more than 40 percent of those now in their 50s and 60s (and then in their teens and 20s) cite World War II as especially important, the same war is also mentioned by approximately 20 percent of those who were not even born when the war ended in 1945.

Or is it the same war that they mention? The fact that these two different age groups cite the same event, even use the same words, does not mean that they think about World War II in the same way, or indeed that they "perceive" it in the same way. It is this issue of possible generational differences in conception and perception that we now turn to. The same issue presents itself even more forcefully for events such as space exploration that do not show a generational effect in number of mentions.

Immediately after our sample of Americans named one or preferably two events or changes as important, we asked them to explain the reasons for each of their choices:

What was it about _____ that makes it seem especially important to you?

We expected to find generational differences in the reasons given, and from these to infer differences in the events themselves as subjectively known. For earlier events, older people can base their choice on direct experience, not necessarily of some core event or change itself—even soldiers were not necessarily in the thick of battle in World War II—but of living through the "real time" of its happening. They can have what are correctly termed autobiographical memories (Halbwachs [1950] 1980; Rubin 1986). Younger people, on the other hand, must base their knowledge of earlier events on what they have heard or read, which may have the advantage of greater perspective but is less likely to be personal or concrete. When we turn to recent events, however, these should be seen by younger people directly and with a fresh eye, whereas older Americans will bring to the same events the world of their youth, with a tendency either to assimilate or to contrast the recent events with personal experience from their earlier years. This was the guiding hypothesis that we explored, though as it turns out the evidence leads toward more varied formulations.

Problems in reasons analysis. The analysis of reasons is more difficult than the analysis of events themselves because we start from the number of people who gave each major event, not the number of people who gave any event. Even with a frequently chosen event like World War II, the base is only 364 cases, and with most other events it is much smaller. Our discussion of reasons will therefore concentrate on the four events with at least 100 mentions—World War II, Vietnam, Space Exploration, and the Kennedy Assassination.⁸

⁸ Although slightly more than 100 respondents are coded as mentioning civil rights, the need to analyze blacks and whites separately reduces the effective numbers well below 100. It is also necessary to limit consideration to more frequently mentioned "reason" code categories, and those categories with less than 20 responses are omitted from Table 3. The categories listed in Table 3 do capture at least one of the reasons mentioned by the great majority of those who chose each event (82 percent for WW II, 89 percent for Vietnam, and 88 percent for Space Exploration). The proportion is smaller for Kennedy's assassination

Table 3. Reasons Given for Event Choices by Age, Education, and Gender

	Age Categories						Logistic <i>t</i> -ratios		
	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	Age	Educ.	Gender
<i>World War II</i>	N: (55)	(70)	(58)	(69)	(73)	(37)			
% War Experience (99)	4	9	14	45	44	54	6.63***	-1.69*	—
% Wartime Shortages (20)	2	0	12	9	4	8	1.33	—	2.48**
% Lives Lost (28)	6	7	5	6	14	5	0.44	-2.01**	—
% Economic Prosperity (66)	18	26	23	20	6	14	-2.11**	—	—
% Patriotism (27)	11	10	7	4	6	3	-1.74*	—	—
% Winning the Good War (62)	13	30	21	12	14	8	-2.36**	-2.18**	-2.21**
% Created World Structure (54)	20	29	14	10	10	3	-2.88***	4.04***	-3.11***
% Large Impact (vague) (52)	18	23	21	10	7	0	-3.23***	—	—
<i>JFK Assassination</i>	N: (19)	(45)	(30)	(8)	(8)	(0)			
% Flashbulb and Other Memories (28)	26	36	20	12	0	0	-1.94*	—	—
% If He Had Lived . . . (23)	26	9	27	25	50	0	1.77*	—	—
% Personal Grief (33)	26	31	23	50	43	0	0.96	—	2.08**
<i>Vietnam</i>	N: (81)	(109)	(50)	(16)	(13)	(5)			
% Veterans Ill-Treated (43)	22	17	8	6	8	0	-2.58***	—	2.32**
% Know Others in War (62)	12	24	32	19	38	40	2.10**	-2.30**	3.17***
% War Experience (33)	7	17	16	0	0	0	-0.66	—	-3.16***
% Division and Distrust (78)	20	34	34	38	15	0	0.36	2.16**	-2.73**
% Lives Lost (69)	28	19	26	44	15	60	0.62	-1.99**	2.14**
% No Meaning (69)	28	19	28	31	38	20	0.35	—	—
% Didn't Win (21)	1	11	10	0	8	20	1.39	—	—
% Didn't Try to Win (23)	7	10	10	0	8	0	-0.26	—	-2.28**
<i>Space Exploration</i>	N: (36)	(38)	(28)	(25)	(17)	(14)			
% Emotional Awe (49)	14	26	29	48	53	36	2.90***	—	2.51**
% Intellectual Excitement (61)	56	34	39	28	35	29	-2.30**	—	2.13**
% Nationalism (31)	28	19	21	20	12	7	-1.83*	—	—
% Practical Spin-offs (58)	33	21	61	44	35	29	2.03**	3.55***	-3.34***

*** $p < .01$. ** $p < .05$. * $p < .10$.

Results of Reasons Analysis

The percentage giving each reason category for each event is presented in Table 3 for six age-groups. For example, of the 55 respondents 18 to 29 years old who mentioned World War II as important, 4 percent gave "war-time experience" as the reason for their mention and 96 percent did not. (The total number of people giving the reason across all ages is also shown in parentheses next to each reason, e.g., 99 respondents for wartime experience.) On the right side of the table, *t*-ratios are provided from logistic regressions in which each reason is treated as a dichotomous dependent variable (given or not given), and age, education, and gender are treated as predictors.⁹ All the *t*-ratios are

provided for age, since it is our main focus, but only those that are statistically significant (at $p < .10$) are noted for education and gender in order to decrease the density of the table. These statistics are shown for initial guidance only, since in some cases nonlinearities will be our focus. It should also be noted that each response could be coded for up to three reasons, and thus the categories shown for an event in Table 3 are not mutually exclusive. (Analysis of first coded reasons only, in order to create mutual exclusivity, yields results similar to those in Table 3.)

World War II. Important age differences occur for the most frequently given World War II reason categories, as shown in Table

(62 percent) because of the omission of a large category of vague miscellaneous responses.

⁹ Education in this analysis also has six categories: 0-8, 9-11, 12, 13-15, 16, 17+ years

of schooling. We do not include the background variable of race here, since this would further reduce sample efficiency because of the need to exclude several small classifications other than white and black. Racial differences, however, are already partly captured by education.

3. The most clear-cut of these relationships is straightforward in interpretation: older people tend to explain their choice of the war as important in terms of personal War Experiences (row 1), with a sharp discontinuity in such reasons between those above and below the present age of 50 (essentially between those alive and those not yet born before the beginning of the war). Examples of these responses are:

I had to go to North Africa. I don't like North Africa. I have to wear a hearing aid now because of it. Lost part of my hearing there. (man, age 70)

Because my husband was away from me for three and a half years and it changed my life a lot. I had a child when he was gone, and I had to go through that alone. (woman, age 72)

The war is remembered as important by these people because they served in the armed forces, or their close relatives were away in the armed forces. Not all such experiential memories were negative—"I was drafted . . . trained in the navy on small boats; the experience was good" (man, age 63)—but almost all are obviously concrete and autobiographic, sometimes vividly so. These percentages of 45 percent, 44 percent, and 54 percent (for those ages 50–59, 60–69, and 70+, respectively) are the highest in the World War II set of reasons, indicating that the dominant reason that older people offer for mentioning World War II as important is personal experience.

Wartime Shortages and Lives Lost are both small categories of response that show some effects of age—more clearly when the results are examined in detail. In the case of Wartime Shortages, the age effect is sharpest when the sample is divided by gender, prompted by the significant gender difference indicated in Table 3. As shown in Table 4, memories of shortages are more common among women, and especially among those women who were quite young near the end of World War II (see also Elder, Gimbel, and Sweat 1988). For

example: "I just remember the lines you had to go through to get your sugar and coffee and gas stamps" (woman, age 50 now, age 10 in 1945). The age effect is less obvious for men, but there are still clear references to early childhood experience: "I remember I couldn't get candy bars," said a middle-age man who was just three years old in 1945.

Mentions of Lives Lost during the war extend over the entire age range, but the largest percentage giving this reason is for those 60 to 69, that is, for people who were teenagers or young adults during the World War II years. If the 60–69 cohort is contrasted with all other ages combined, the difference reaches conventional significance: $L^2 = 4.48$, $df = 1$, $p = .03$. Moreover, for those in the 60 to 69 cohort, these responses often suggest direct emotional meaning:

A lot of lives were lost. I came home but a lot didn't. (man, age 63)

For younger people, the same type of coded response is more distant and removed from the scene:

It was a good thing to have it end and people weren't being killed any more. (man, age 23)

Thus the Lives Lost reason probably contains age differences in personal meaning that are not fully captured by statistical testing of the gross code category itself.

What do younger people, who were not even born in 1945, "remember" about World War II? The two most reliable relations in the direction of youth are the categories labeled Created World Structure and Large Impact. Both types of response refer to the importance of World War II from a broader perspective, and they differ from each other mainly in how elaborated the response is, as suggested by the fact that Created World Structure has a positive association with education in Table 3, whereas Large Impact does not. For example, the two responses below were coded, respectively, as Created World Structure and Large Impact:

Table 4. Wartime Shortages by Age and Gender^a

Mentioning Shortages	18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70+
Men	3% (31)	0% (42)	7% (30)	3% (34)	0% (40)	5% (19)
Women	0% (23)	0% (28)	18% (28)	14% (35)	9% (33)	11% (18)

^a Base Ns are in parentheses.

The way it changed world relations. Created alignments of countries. The cold war was caused by World War II, precipitated by it. (man, age 36, college graduate)

Affected more people than any other war. (man, age 36, high school graduate)

Both responses are of a kind that might be learned in courses on American history, or from television, or in the case of the second response might almost be inferred from the word "world" in "World War."

Much more interesting theoretically is the relation to younger ages of responses categorized as Winning the Good War. The responses refer to the fact that the United States triumphed in World War II and that it was a good war because it involved a struggle against evil:

If we didn't win the war, this would be a different kind of world—not as much freedom. (woman, age 31)

That was a victorious war so it was exhilarating to bond together in the country. (woman, age 36)

These responses are not only related linearly to younger ages, but are given especially by the main Vietnam generation age-group (those who were in their teens and 20s at the height of the Vietnam War), *not* by those who either are younger now or were alive during World War II. When the Vietnam age category (30–39) is compared with all other age categories combined, controlling for education and gender, the difference is highly significant ($t=3.31$). (We note also that such responses are given more often by males and by the least educated, but these other background factors do not interact with age.¹⁰) Thus, it is primarily the Vietnam generation that looks back on World War II as

the "good war" that we fought and won—not those who lived during the war itself!

This finding calls for an important reversal to the more usual proposition that older people are the ones most likely to see recent events in terms of a world that is now gone. In the case of World War II, it is a younger generation who see an earlier event, World War II, in terms of their later experience with Vietnam. These Vietnam generation representatives are nostalgic for a world they have never known directly, in contrast to the world of their own youth during the divisive late 1960s and early 1970s. We might term this "vicarious nostalgia," a socially created version of Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Miniver Cheever."¹¹

Younger people also tend to think of other positive features or consequences of the war. They look back on it as a time of Patriotism (row 5) and also a time of Economic Prosperity (row 4). The first of these, Patriotism (e.g., "the country came together as a whole during that time; everybody worked as a unit" [man, age 36]), is readily understood as being much the same as Winning the Good War, though it appears equally concentrated among the youngest Vietnam and post-Vietnam respondents. But the second, Economic Prosperity, is more surprising and is contrary to our initial expectation. It had seemed likely that the wartime and immediate postwar prosperity would be salient mainly to those who had experienced it, and that younger people would not associate "war" with economic gain. Yet the logistic result is in the opposite direction, and Economic Prosperity can be seen to be mentioned at a fairly uniform level from 18 to 59, then to drop sharply among the main World War II generation. However, many of these responses turn out on closer examination to be not about World War II itself, but rather about the postwar prosperity:

¹⁰ Winning the Good War includes some responses that emphasize only the "winning" aspect and some that emphasize mainly the good versus evil aspect. Although a single combined category is analyzed here, analysis of codes for the separate aspects yields the same conclusions for relations to age. However, mentions only of "winning" are given disproportionately by males and by the less educated, whereas mentions of good versus evil are unrelated to sex and education. It is the former, therefore, that produces the sex and education relations in Table 3 for Winning the Good War.

¹¹ In agreement with Davis (1979, p. 8), true nostalgia refers to "a personally experienced past, rather than one drawn solely from chronicles, almanacs, history books." The latter is nicely represented in Robinson's poem:

Miniver loved the days of old
When swords were bright and steeds were
prancing;
The vision of a warrior bold
Would set him dancing.
Miniver sighed for what was not. . . .

Well, I was a war baby. I benefited from it like the others did. . . . It all came easy. Education, jobs, wealth. (man, age 42)

Our financial outlook changed for the good. My dad came home from the war; he bought a house—which we had never had before—a car, and other things. Things just started looking up. (woman, age 51)

Thus, some of the responses have fairly clear experiential content, though others are by people too young to have been part of the postwar prosperity period and refer vaguely to improvements in the economy.¹²

The Kennedy assassination. Nominations of the 1963 assassination of John Kennedy as one of the important events of the past 50 years are already clustered within a fairly narrow age range, but the reasons given for these mentions show some additional relations to age. One set of “reasons” is simply a clear memory of the assassination, in terms of either a specific “flashbulb” image of hearing of the event itself (Brown and Kulik 1977; Neisser 1982), or a more general report of its being memorable. These slightly different references to memory are illustrated by the following two quotations, the first of the flashbulb variety and the second more general in nature:

I remember it vividly. I was in my sixth grade class when the principal came in to announce it. (woman, age 33)

I was very young and it made a big impression on me. (woman, age 30)

The two types of remembering have been

¹² Reasons for mentioning the Depression parallel reasons for mentioning World War II in that older people explain their choice of the Depression in terms of remembered hardships, whereas young people’s explanations tend to be in terms of New Deal legislation and other social outcomes. It may be that the positive side of a past event tends to be stressed more by later generations that did not experience it. We had also expected to find among the oldest Depression cohort reasons that referred to valuing frugality, but such responses occur mainly among those 50 years old now, which means they were born in 1935 and were the children of the Depression cohort, rather than from the Depression cohort itself. On reflection, it is plausible that frugality as a personal *habit* became part of the “natural” world of young children through socialization by the Depression cohort of parents, and thus differs from reasons that are connected with experience during adolescence.

combined in Table 3 because the number of cases in each is small (13 cases classified as flashbulb and 15 as more general memory) and because when viewed separately they show identical trends. The linear relation of this combined Memory category is for younger people to mention clear memories of the assassination more often than do older people. However, when the bivariate association is examined more closely, it is the second youngest cohort—those 30 to 39, who were 8 to 17 in 1963—that speaks especially of memory. (If the 30 to 39 age cohort is contrasted with the other age categories combined, $L^2 = 4.04$, $df = 1$, $p = .04$.) The absence of specific memories by those very young in 1985 is hardly surprising—our 18-year-olds were not born until 1967—but the fact that memories are not often mentioned by those over 30 is a more meaningful finding. It suggests that even those older respondents who named the assassination as especially important were less likely to recall it in personal terms such as where they were and what they were doing at the time of the event. Flashbulb memories, whether completely accurate or not (Neisser 1982), point directly to the way in which a traumatic event leaves an imprint by disrupting the natural world of childhood.

Older people, on the other hand, tend to give as a reason for mentioning the assassination a type of response that we have called “If he had lived. . . .” These are statements about how Kennedy’s assassination led to negative changes in the United States, though the changes are seldom specified very clearly. For example:

Things would be different today if he lived but I don’t know how. He was a great man. (man, age 64)

Thus people who were middle-aged or older when the assassination occurred were not as dramatically affected by the stark report of the shooting as by a more general sense of political loss that it signified.

The one other clear category that we were able to code involved strong expressions of grief and shock over the assassination:

I was at school and we were all very devastated. One girl even started crying. (woman, age 28)

Although some of these responses are part of a flashbulb memory, this is not always true and the correlates of the two categories are

not the same. Here the main correlate is gender: 26 of the 33 respondents coded as reporting personal grief are women.

Vietnam. Mentions of Vietnam as important, like mentions of Kennedy's assassination, have a narrow age range, with nearly 70 percent of such answers coming from respondents under 40 years of age. (Even where percentages look large among older respondents, the base *N*'s are quite small in the case of Vietnam, e.g., only five cases among those 70 and over, and hence the percentages in Table 3 are misleading unless this is taken into account.) Because of this age constriction, explanations for such mentions are not likely to show much association with age.

Of the eight types of reasons in Table 3 for mentioning Vietnam, two show significant linear relations to age, two show significant curvilinear relations, and four show only trends or point to no relation. The clearest linear association is negative: young people speak in terms of veterans being ill-treated, which quite likely results from the fact that Vietnam veterans were ignored during and immediately after the war and their problems only recently became a salient issue:

A lot of people went over there and fought and died and when they came back no one was happy with them even though the government sent them over there. (woman, age 20)

Thus Vietnam Veterans is a young person's reason because it really refers to a more recent event than the Vietnam war itself.

Know Others in War also shows a significant linear relation to age, but in this case positive in direction and produced mainly because of the disproportionately small number of post-Vietnam generation persons (ages 18–29) who give such a reason. Those offering the reason are usually the relative and friends of soldiers:

I was involved in it. My husband and my brother served over there. (woman, age 35)

The two significant curvilinear relations are for Personal War Experience (quadratic term: $t = -2.35$) and Division and Distrust (quadratic term: $t = -2.35$). The first type of response is most frequent among those in their 30s and 40s and often involved direct military experience in Vietnam:

I was in the service at that time and I lost friends in the war. (man, age 40)

The second type of response also occurs especially among the 30 to 49 age cohorts, and it includes two slightly different types of response, here combined under the rubric Division and Distrust:

It separated the country. The people who were antiwar and the people who were pro. It put the country in a turmoil. (man, age 31)

I'm very cautious now. I don't trust people or governments. . . . I'm just wary about the government. (man, age 36)

This is the largest of the Vietnam war categories, and it directly reflects the disillusionment felt by the Vietnam generation but extends as well to a still older cohort (50 to 59) that was in its 30s when the war began.

There are also nonsignificant curvilinear trends for the categories Didn't Win and Didn't Try to win. The former is generally offered as a matter of fact conclusion about the disappointing outcome of the war, while the latter is a much more ideological condemnation of the government for not pursuing victory with greater vigor. For both categories, it is the Vietnam generation and just beyond (ages 30–49) that produce the bulk of the responses. Finally, there are two categories that show no sign of a relation to age: mention of Lives Lost, which we note also failed to be related to age when offered as a World War II reason, and vague statements to the effect that the Vietnam War had no meaning. These relatively frequent reasons for mentioning Vietnam as important tend to be given at all age levels.

Space. Unlike the three events dealt with thus far, the sheer number of mentions of space exploration as an important event or change did not show any sign of an association with age. Even if after-the-fact speculations about the uniqueness of scientific events can account for the absence of an age relation, we might still expect the reasons given for such mentions to differ by age. The reactions of a 10-year-old and of a 50-year-old were unlikely to be quite the same as they watched Neil Armstrong step from Apollo 11 onto the moon, and this should show up in 1985 when each recalls the event some 16 years later. The results in Table 3 bear out this expectation, for all four main reasons given for mentioning space exploration are significantly associated with age—two in each direction.

Emotional Awe and wonder over space

exploits are expressed disproportionately by those approaching age 50 and beyond. A respondent of 50 today was 34 at the time of the moon landing, and it is these people who are most apt to use words like “fantastic” or “amazing” in explaining why space exploration was the most important event of the past 50 years:

I saw accomplishments I never thought I'd see and they happened so quickly. I'm just fascinated by it. (man, age 52)

Sheer minds that are back of all that. I'm amazed at that much intelligence and courage. Sheer magnitude of it all. (woman, age 69)

On the other hand, younger respondents, perhaps because they have lived with space exploration almost from the beginning and are future-oriented, are especially likely to speculate about the Intellectual Excitement of new developments still to some:

Our world will change in the next 50 years because of what's going on the space industry. We may make moves to live elsewhere. (woman, age 24)

Well, we might even have space stations and so if we destroy our world, we will have a place to go. (woman, age 27)

There is a futuristic science-fiction quality to the excitement of the young, as distinct from the simpler awe of older respondents at a world so different from their youth. The contrast provides a good example of how the two ends of the age spectrum recall—and presumably experience—the same objective event in different ways. Moreover, the results for Emotional Awe and Intellectual Excitement hold just as strongly if only reasons for mentioning the 1969 Moon Landing are tested, rather than for all mentions of space exploration.

Younger and middle-age respondents also show a tendency more than the oldest respondents to stress national goals and national pride (Nationalism) when talking about space exploration:

Because we know what Russia has up there and we can keep pace with them on their level. (woman, age 24)

Gives you a sense of pride of being American. (man, age 47)

Older respondents, on the other hand, are likely to cite practical spin-offs from space exploration. Since more highly educated and

male respondents similarly see practical value to space explorations, it is the older, male, highly educated respondents who most often refer to such practical payoffs, though in analysis not shown here this combination of characteristics appears to be an additive set, not an interactive one. Examples of such responses are:

They've come a long way in predicting the weather and that sort of thing. (man, age 53, high school graduate)

In sum, older respondents see space exploits as utterly unexpected events and express surprise and pleasure about them. Older respondents are also likely to note the technological gains in other areas of life that have been stimulated by space developments. Younger respondents tend to take past space accomplishments as given, and to speculate more on future possibilities such as space colonies or travel to other parts of the universe. The young are also more apt to view space exploration as a race with the Soviet Union and to show pride in what they see as uniquely American achievements.

CONCLUSIONS

For the majority of 12 major national or world events and changes from the past half century that Americans recall as especially important, the memories refer back disproportionately to a time when the respondents were in their teens or early 20s. Thus the data fit well both the general hypothesis that memories of important political events and social changes are structured by age, and the more specific hypothesis that adolescence and early adulthood is the primary period for generational imprinting in the sense of political memories.¹³ Furthermore, for memories of two other types of change, the group most directly affected—blacks for civil rights and women for women's rights—show similar age structuring, and in a third case—answers referring to moral decline—there is evidence that a larger sample of responses might allow finer coding which would yield the hypothesized age relation. In the end, there are only two clear exceptions to the hypothesis about age structuring of memories, and both of these

¹³ Henceforth we use either “event” or “change” to refer to both particular events and more general changes.

involve scientific developments: the exploration of space and the invention of the computer. Quite possibly it is the nonpolitical nature of these two events that accounts for their lack of association with age, perhaps because there is less interference from earlier events than is the case for political issues. (See Brown, Shevell, and Rips 1986, for other evidence that political and nonpolitical public events are remembered differently.)

Of course, not everyone names an event from his or her youth when asked to recall important events or changes over the past half century. However, we expected the meaning respondents give to an event to be heavily influenced by their own experience during youth, whether or not the event itself came from that period of their life. The evidence for this hypothesis cannot be evaluated in as precise a way as can the simple recall of events, but several findings are supportive. Those who chose an event that happened during their own adolescence or early adulthood show a strong tendency to explain their choice in terms of straightforward personal experience at that time, for example, service in the army during World War II, or a presumed flashbulb memory of the Kennedy assassination. However, those whose own youth occurred in a period different from that of the event they mention show a tendency to contrast the event implicitly with events from their own adolescence and young adulthood. The most striking example of this is the finding that characterizations of World War II as a "good war" and a "victorious war" come less from the World War II generation itself than from the later Vietnam generation now in its 30s and early 40s. Thus youthful experience of an actual event or change often focuses memories on the direct personal meaning of the experience, whereas the attribution of some larger political meaning to the event is more likely to be made by those who did not experience it at all, or at least did not experience it during their adolescence or early adulthood. Not every explanation of remembered events fits this conclusion neatly: the Vietnam war itself provides a partial exception, since memories of that period's divisiveness and distrust, which are at once personal and more generalized, do come disproportionately from the Vietnam generation; but each of the four events producing sufficient explanations for detailed examination—World War II, Vietnam, space exploration,

and the Kennedy assassination—shows cohort differences in perception that seem to reflect differences in generational vantage points.

Our earlier use of the term "generational imprinting" may suggest an almost machine-like stamping in process, as Rubin, Wetzler, and Nebes (1986) imply in their discussion of reminiscence, but this is not our interpretation. The importance of adolescence and early adulthood can be seen instead to emerge out of the conjunction of several life course factors: first, the low salience for most people of events that occurred prior to their own lifetime, or even prior to their near-intellectual maturity in adolescence; second, the openness of adolescents and young adults to events and influences from outside the home and neighborhood; and third, the importance of the first political and social events that people encounter for shaping their later views of the political and social world, so that subsequent events seldom seem as significant as those encountered earlier. Generational imprinting can thus be regarded as a consequence of normal individual development, just as differences in generational perspectives on the "same" event can be seen to be a consequence of varying locations in historical time.

Our results also suggest a need to distinguish between at least two meanings of the term "collective memory." On the one hand, when large parts of the population appear to remember a common object, this can be thought of as a form of collective memory. However, it may be a rather superficial form, especially when on closer examination the memories turn out to be quite personal and particular—less about "World War II" as a collectively conceptualized event than about one's personal loss of hearing while on military assignment in North Africa, or the shortage of candy bars on the home front. On the other hand, when a large part of the Vietnam generation remembers the Vietnam period as one of distrust and division, this is a collective memory in the more general sense of being collectively created and collectively held, and it probably has more general import for future actions by members of that generation. However, using this second meaning, if members of the Vietnam generation also "remember" World War II as a triumph of good over evil, even though they were not alive at the time, this is a kind of

collective memory too. Collective memories in this second sense of widely shared images of a past event need not be personally experienced and thus begin to be difficult to distinguish from Durkheim's ([1901] 1938) conception of traditional beliefs as a form of "collective representation" (see also Bloch 1925). The difference may lie less in the content of the memory than in the degree of personal feeling that is apt to accompany events lived through, as against events learned about second-hand.

Whether the generational memories documented in this paper influence future behavior is an important issue, but not a simple one. For one thing, some of the most deeply felt memories reported by the public have little clear implication for future behavior. The assassination of John F. Kennedy was the fourth most frequently remembered event in our study, yet the meaning that people took from the assassination seems to have been more personal and philosophic than political:

Reality hit me. It made me see death and blood and after that there were no surprises for me. (man, age 31 now, age 9 when Kennedy was shot)

We all stopped being so innocent. We thought everything in the U.S. was good and pure, and we found out it wasn't so. (woman, age 51 now, 29 when Kennedy was shot)

Furthermore, even for events such as World War II, which might at first seem full of political meaning, most memories were about personal experiences that had no obvious implication for future political behavior. Even though we did not probe specifically for political interpretations, their extreme rarity of occurrence in spontaneous answers suggests that wider political generalization was not an important result of experience connected with that war, though of course it may have played a more significant role in shaping the views of future political leaders (Converse 1964, 1987).

Even for memories that have more apparent relevance to the future, for example, memories of the divisiveness of the Vietnam era, there may be quite contradictory lessons drawn, some people focusing blame on the government or the military, some on the press or on liberal critics of the war. These two different lines of political interpretation correspond roughly to Mannheim's (1952) distinction between the perspectives of different

"generational units," and they indicate again the danger of moving too quickly from one's own views of the lessons of the war to predictions of the views, let alone future behavior, of others. In addition, the general public was less concerned about the larger moral issues of the war than about the likelihood of winning or losing it (Schuman 1972), so the most obvious implications for decisions about future American intervention are contingent on that aspect of a new situation, with enthusiastic backing of what seems like a painless intervention (e.g., Grenada), but reluctance to support what is thought to be riskier involvement (e.g., Central America).

None of these considerations means that generational memories of the past are unrelated to future actions, but rather that as Weber ([1956] 1968) insisted, it is important to understand what events mean to individuals and social groups, since subjective meaning is a crucial element in the translation of experience into future action. The findings in this paper help move us in that direction.

There is one other important empirical problem that needs to be addressed in considering our results. A study like this at a single point in time inevitably confounds cohort effects with the "objective" importance of events. One might argue that older people choose World War II as especially important because it was in a real sense the most important single event of the past half century. According to this argument, if our study had been carried out in 1950, we might have discovered no age effect at all, since virtually everyone would have selected World War II as most important—a type of "period effect." From this standpoint, only one additional factor needs to be added to explain the choices of events in 1985: the ignorance of today's youth about the truly important events of the past 50 years that occurred before their adolescence. However, while historical importance is no doubt a major factor in influencing events, the diverse series of age-related choices reported in this paper make such a purely historical argument untenable (see Schwartz 1982 for a balanced treatment of this issue). In addition, the quite personal reasons that people often give for their nominations of events show clearly that generational effects on memory are much more than simply a mental recording of external pointers to historical importance.

Some people certainly make judgments that reflect primarily the perspective of historians toward the past, but for most of us it is the intersection of personal and national history that provides the most vital and remembered connection to the times we have lived through.

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APPENDIX A

First Mentioned Important Events/Changes by Age

Event/Change (N)	Age					
	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70 plus
World War II (265)	14	16	24	29	30	23
Vietnam (144)	18	18	13	2	4	1
Space exploration (93)	8	6	8	10	6	8
Kennedy assassination (62)	3	8	10	3	1	1
Civil rights (77)	7	7	5	7	6	3
Nuclear war, threat of (55)	6	5	6	4	2	3
Communication/transportation (46)	1	4	4	5	3	9
Depression (43)	3	3	2	5	7	13
Computers (23)	2	1	2	3	2	0
Terrorism (43)	4	2	0	1	1	0
Moral decline (28)	2	2	2	2	4	1
Women's rights (20)	1	2	3	0	2	1
Other event/change (357)	30	26	22	29	33	37
	100	100	100	100	100	100
	(289)	(312)	(200)	(167)	(165)	(110)

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