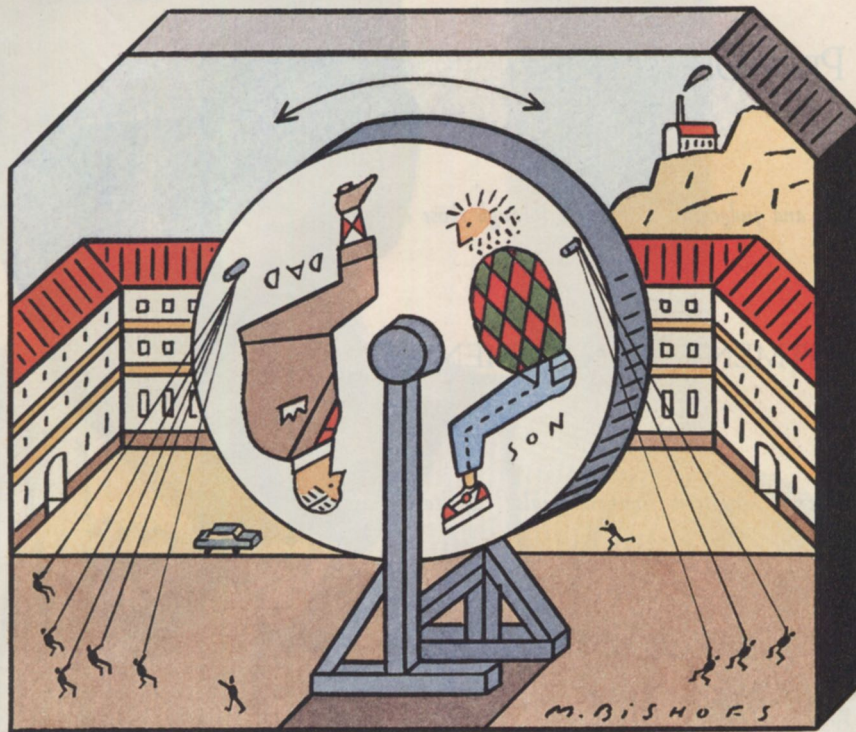


# De-Generations



**Once the embodiment  
of rectitude, the American father is now  
indistinguishable from his children.**

**BY JOHN SEDGWICK**

THE HISTORIAN ARTHUR Schlesinger, Jr., has a theory he inherited from his father, the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., that American politics swings from conservative to liberal roughly every 30 years. The idea gained credence last year with the election of Bill Clinton 32 years after John F. Kennedy, who, in turn, had come 28 years after Franklin D. Roosevelt.

It is a comforting notion, that of a great pendulum sweeping smoothly back and forth, bringing in the yin and then bringing in the yang. I only wish it also described another important aspect of American life: its manners. These seem to conform to a different metaphor for generational change—that of a tennis ball bouncing down a long, never-ending staircase. How else could we have reached the point where an exhibitionist like Madonna commands the nation's attention, teenagers bring semiautomatics to class, and a president of the United States calls his opponent a bozo?

The clearest evidence of society's predicament, however,

can be seen in the sad descent of the American father. Once the embodiment of rectitude, he is now indistinguishable in manners and moral authority from his children.

I know this because I am a father myself and I can see the decline in my own lineage. I think of my grandfather, a dapper, cultivated gent who would have felt undressed if he had appeared in public without a jacket and a tie, which he insisted on calling a cravat. He was so correct that when he remarried, at age 90, he berated the minister, a mere 65, in tones of genuine outrage for mispronouncing the word *truth* in his wedding vows.

Then I think of my dad, who, although considerably less punctilious than my grandfather, used to correct the way I set the table. "Fork," he would recite in his vaguely English accent, "or fork and spoon, but *never* spoon alone." And finally I think of myself, who, despite all the best schooling, still can't tie a bow tie, almost never goes to church, and lets the chil-



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## Social Relations

dren eat breakfast in front of the TV.

I may have a warped view of the generational decline, since my father was, in effect, two generations separated from me, being 55 when I was born. Still, I can't help thinking that dads have fallen further in the last 30 years than in the 30 years before that. Through my father's generation, the idea of fatherhood went beyond the mere act of procreation to involve such now-musty concepts as honor, character, duty, and manhood.

My father tried to uphold such manly virtues. He had boxed at Harvard, and one of his proudest moments came on a train when he was mistaken for Jack Dempsey. He had a copy of Rudyard Kipling's hymn to manliness, "If," framed on his wall:

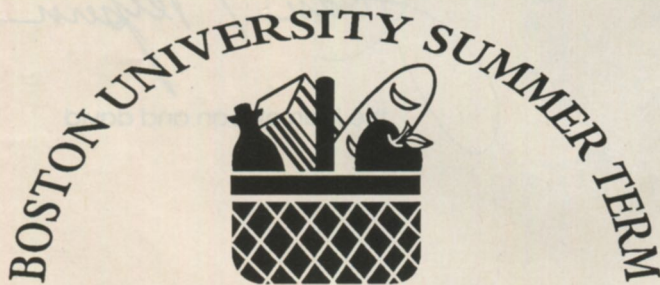
If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance  
run,  
Yours is the Earth and everything  
that's in it,  
And—which is more—you'll be a  
Man, my son!

Corny as those lines sound today, my father lived by such precepts. Now, under siege by feminism, manliness has had to go out and bang drums in the woods to try to find itself again.

**I**N A 1986 ESSAY CALLED "DERIDE AND CONQUER," sociologist Mark Crispin Miller chronicles the devolution of fatherhood by recounting the history of TV dads. In the fifties we had "Make Room for Daddy" and "Father Knows Best," whose titles reflected the importance and power of the patriarch. "Confronted with some hint of independence," Miller writes, "Dad didn't have to raise a fist, but could restore conformity just by manifesting his supreme Dadhood: the mild frown of disappointment, the bland and chilling summons to 'a little talk.'"

But then everything started to fall apart. In the sixties, the typical TV dad was Dick Van Dyke's helpless Rob Petrie, caught between a boorish boss and a nervous-Nellie wife. In the seventies, Dad became the reactionary know-nothing Archie Bunker of "All in the Family." In the eighties, he was Bill Cosby's Cliff Huxtable, so gentle in his authoritarianism that if only he had looked younger, he could easily have been mistaken for one of the kids. In the nineties, Homer Simpson, life's biggest loser, reigns as TV's latest dad. It may be a bleak harbinger of things to come that Murphy Brown's famous baby has no father at all.

I don't mean to sound like Dan Quayle. But is it necessarily hopelessly retrograde to feel that we'd all be better off if dads sat



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a little higher in their easy chairs?

The issue isn't really Dad himself but rather the greater force that dads represent—namely, a sense of authority in our lives. For my generation, authority was a casualty of the Vietnam War, during which leaders everywhere (at least the ones over 30) were presumed to be part of the military-industrial-governmental conspiracy that brought us that disaster.

Authority's few remaining shreds of legitimacy were swept away in the other defining event for our generation: Watergate. And to judge by the powerful anti-incumbent sentiment in the last election, that deep distrust of authority has not yet dissipated.

In the end, of course, Dad, in the person of 68-year-old George Bush, was brought low, and a fellow boomer was installed in the White House.

**W**E BABY BOOMERS HAVE ALWAYS been self-referential, possibly just because of our daunting numbers. But as a result, we've been responsible only to ourselves. Even as we enter middle age, we remain children. We wear sneakers and jeans, we live on take-out or fast food, we call people by their first names, we listen to the same music we liked in our teens, and we are so frightened of the commitment of marriage that we wait forever to get hitched and then still divorce as never before.

Like kids at a playground, we complain freely about being victimized by others (he hit me) but are loath to take responsibility for our own actions. We are the adult children of alcoholics, or the victims of childhood sexual abuse or altered brain chemistry or too many Twinkies.

Not long ago, I attended a mock trial staged by the Black Law Students Association at Harvard at which they put Christopher Columbus on trial for racism, genocide, and slavery. I thought the students must be joking, but everyone took the trial very seriously indeed, even though the students were attempting to blame present troubles on something that happened 500 years ago. Oh, please.

My father didn't tolerate whining from his children, needless to say, and I can't say that I like it much in my own. But there is a terrible temptation to give in to whatever it is that kids happen to want at any particular moment, because it's easier and because dads everywhere want their children to like them. Still, appeasement never works. A better strategy might be for our generation of dads finally to grow up and start acting like dads.

Let's sit the snivelers down for a little talk. □



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