

**October 10, 2007**

**OP-ED COLUMNIST**

## **Generation Q**

**By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN**

I just spent the past week visiting several colleges — Auburn, the University of Mississippi, Lake Forest and Williams — and I can report that the more I am around this generation of college students, the more I am both baffled and impressed.

I am impressed because they are so much more optimistic and idealistic than they should be. I am baffled because they are so much less radical and politically engaged than they need to be.

One of the things I feared most after 9/11 — that my daughters would not be able to travel the world with the same carefree attitude my wife and I did at their age — has not come to pass.

Whether it was at Ole Miss or Williams or my alma mater, Brandeis, college students today are not only going abroad to study in record numbers, but they are also going abroad to build homes for the poor in El Salvador in record numbers or volunteering at AIDS clinics in record numbers. Not only has terrorism not deterred them from traveling, they are rolling up their sleeves and diving in deeper than ever.

The Iraq war may be a mess, but I noticed at Auburn and Ole Miss more than a few young men and women proudly wearing their R.O.T.C. uniforms. Many of those not going abroad have channeled their national service impulses into increasingly popular programs at home like “Teach for America,” which has become to this generation what the Peace Corps was to mine.

It’s for all these reasons that I’ve been calling them “Generation Q” — the Quiet Americans, in the best sense of that term, quietly pursuing their idealism, at home and abroad.

But Generation Q may be too quiet, too online, for its own good, and for the country’s own good. When I think of the huge budget deficit, Social Security deficit and ecological deficit that our generation is leaving this generation, if they are not spitting mad, well, then they’re just not paying attention. And we’ll just keep piling it on them.

There is a good chance that members of Generation Q will spend their entire adult lives digging out from the deficits that we — the “Greediest Generation,” epitomized by George W. Bush — are leaving them.

When I was visiting my daughter at her college, she asked me about a terrifying story that ran in this newspaper on Oct. 2, reporting that the Arctic ice cap was melting “to an extent unparalleled in a century or more” — and that the entire Arctic system appears to be “heading toward a new, more watery state” likely triggered by “human-caused global warming.”

“What happened to that Arctic story, Dad?” my daughter asked me. How could the news media just report

one day that the Arctic ice was melting far faster than any models predicted “and then the story just disappeared?” Why weren’t any of the candidates talking about it? Didn’t they understand: this has become the big issue on campuses?

No, they don’t seem to understand. They seem to be too busy raising money or buying votes with subsidies for ethanol farmers in Iowa. The candidates could actually use a good kick in the pants on this point. But where is it going to come from?

Generation Q would be doing itself a favor, and America a favor, if it demanded from every candidate who comes on campus answers to three questions: What is your plan for mitigating climate change? What is your plan for reforming Social Security? What is your plan for dealing with the deficit — so we all won’t be working for China in 20 years?

America needs a jolt of the idealism, activism and outrage (it must be in there) of Generation Q. That’s what twentysomethings are for — to light a fire under the country. But they can’t e-mail it in, and an online petition or a mouse click for carbon neutrality won’t cut it. They have to get organized in a way that will force politicians to pay attention rather than just patronize them.

Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy didn’t change the world by asking people to join their Facebook crusades or to download their platforms. Activism can only be uploaded, the old-fashioned way — by young voters speaking truth to power, face to face, in big numbers, on campuses or the Washington Mall. Virtual politics is just that — virtual.

Maybe that’s why what impressed me most on my brief college swing was actually a statue — the life-size statue of James Meredith at the University of Mississippi. Meredith was the first African-American to be admitted to Ole Miss in 1962. The Meredith bronze is posed as if he is striding toward a tall limestone archway, re-enacting his fateful step onto the then-segregated campus — defying a violent, angry mob and protected by the National Guard.

Above the archway, carved into the stone, is the word “Courage.” That is what real activism looks like. There is no substitute.

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)