

Now this generation faces its future

By Leo I. Higdon, Jr., Guest Columnist
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"It's trite now to say that the world changed for Americans after Sept. 11. But it can't be emphasized enough that none will be affected more than America's college students ..." They are the MTV generation, the wealthiest generation to walk the Earth. They were awakened to a scary reality that the world can be a violent place filled with ignorance and hate, and they are the ones most affected, for it is their future at stake. Now these students will realize why we've been teaching them history, political science, religion and all those other subjects that just a month ago may have seemed irrelevant.

For these people, ages 17 to 22, many of the cultural totems they've been exposed to in the past decade have become remote, even moot. The computer games, the endless television and movie saturation, even the ubiquitous Internet, never prepared them to witness what they saw on Sept. 11. Every generation has its defining moments — Pearl Harbor, the "Sputnik" era, the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, even the "dot-com" revolution. Now it is this generation's time to face its future, and they are more than up to the task.

For starters, jobs won't be as plentiful. Depending on the world situation, the next year or two may more resemble the mid-'70s than the mid-'90s. Some students will be denied fast-track jobs in business and industry that were almost a birthright of the '90s. These students now realize that the economy, and the world, is a fragile thing. After all, 19 terrorists armed with box cutters killed more than 5,000 and probably pushed the world's largest economy into a recession.

Secondly, this generation has just been awakened to a reality that "globalization" has a dark side, too. Yes, technology united the world, but it also helped this terrible attack occur. We've mostly seen the benefits of globalization and have not been as concerned about foreign affairs and cultures. This generation has been jarred, as we all have been, by the surprising fact that there are perhaps thousands of people around the world who seek our destruction and see our culture as harmful.

Thirdly, this generation has been weaned on a steady diet where all topics were subject to irony and cynicism. That has changed in the wake of the collapsing World Trade Center. Now this generation has come to realize that some things really do matter, that principles are indeed important. Nothing less than our way of life was threatened on Sept. 11. This generation of college students has responded very well so far, as evidenced by the outpouring of patriotism and compassion on campuses.

There are no silver linings in such a catastrophe. There are only lessons to be learned by young Americans and with that opportunities for educators to help them shape their responses through informed dialogue. The fervor of political discourse has spiked in this country and it has become our responsibility to maintain that political debate. Students now are talking about matters that only two months ago would have seemed irrelevant, maybe even the butt of jokes. Early indications are that students are crowding into classrooms to learn more about such things as world affairs, political thought, and the complexities of Islamic religion and thought.

One important lesson for this generation to learn, and that this cruel attack has brought home, is that one must be prepared to cope with wildly random events in life. One of the ways in which to do this involves well-rounded education that enables a person to separate fact from opinion, and to make decisions based upon a broad base of information. The information age has produced just that — information — but it has not necessarily brought with it intelligence or even a civilizing influence. We still live in a world that can supply many unpleasant surprises. All the more reason for these college students to learn more about this world.

I urge parents and educators to engage students in public life. Working with community and professional leaders, they become more accomplished at focusing on the challenges of civic life and exploring regional issues in a global context. Unfortunately, this isn't the first time the world has been victim to such circumstances, and it will be far from the last. But what young adults must understand is that there are ways to comprehend such events that lead to better decision-making in the future, to finding solutions to problems that will be unsolvable to the ignorant.

Lee Higdon wrote this article while president of the College of Charleston from 2001-2006.