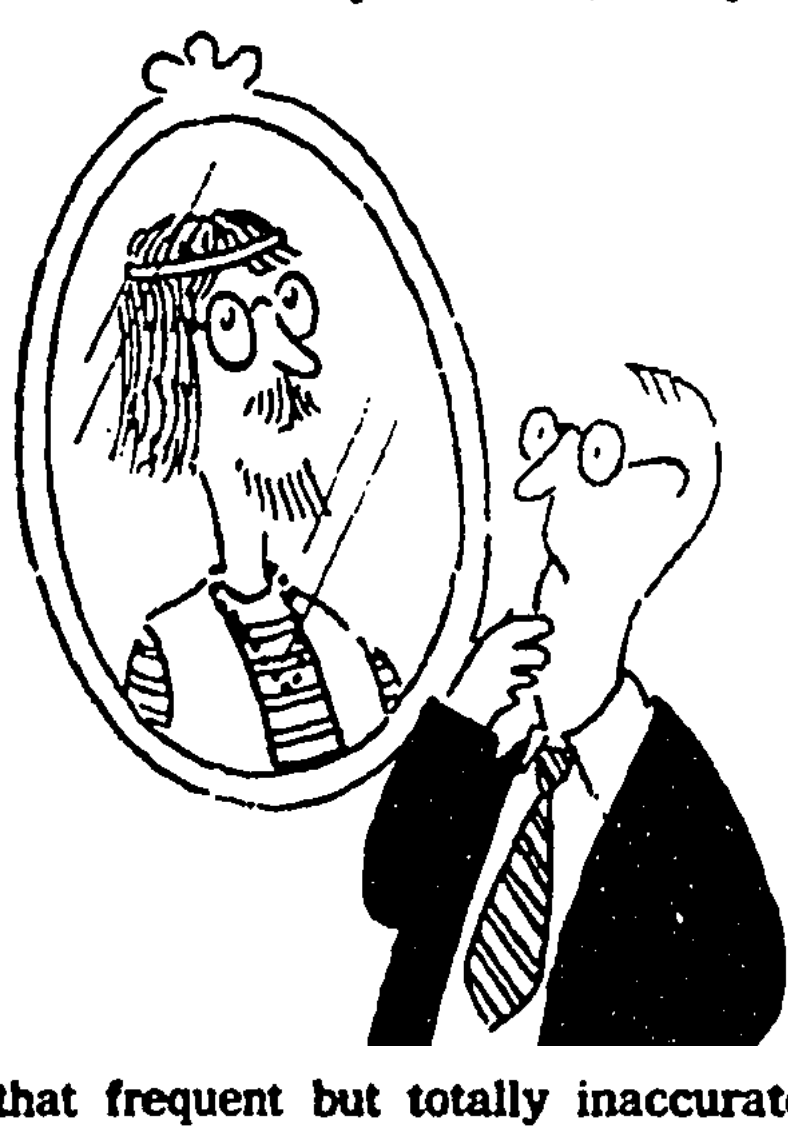


# Uncle Sam Is Now 30

By Landon Y. Jones

PRINCETON, N.J. — Just 15 years ago, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement told us, "Don't Trust Anybody Over 30." That's a risky proposition now. According to the series II projections of the Census Bureau, the median age of all Americans on July 1, 1979, was precisely 30.0. Put simply, this means that half of us are on one side of the once-dreaded generation Rubicon, half on the other. For social historians, this is as significant a demographic milestone in its own way as 1920, when for the first time more Americans lived in the cities than on the farms.

In retrospect the youth culture of the 1960's was an aberration, an anomaly caused by the unexpected arrival of the postwar baby boom. Before then, the median age of Americans had gradually increased throughout this century. From just under 23 in 1900, it had risen as high as 30.2 as recently as 1955 — before the baby boom children tugged it back under 28 by 1970. (Never in the 1960's, incidentally, was "half the country under 25," despite



that frequent but totally inaccurate assertion.) Today, with the arrival of the "baby bust," the most interesting question is not why we're getting older — practically every other country in the world is, too. Rather, it's what were the cultural or economic forces that came together to make us younger during the extraordinary 15-year burst of the baby boom?

Now we're getting older again. In fact, the inexorable upward creep of the median age would be already well over 30 if not for the relatively high fertility rate of black Americans. The estimated median age among blacks on July 1 was 24.7, compared with 32.9 for white women. Even so, the Census Bureau projection accepted by most demographers forecasts the national age rising to 35 by the year 2000 and to an astonishing 37.8 by 2040. Social Security and health care are just the most visible problems ahead.

Looming immediately is a national post-30 decade that could be called the Aging Eighties. Writing about turning 30 in "The Great Gatsby," F. Scott Fitzgerald worried about "the portentous, menacing road of a new decade." It meant for him "the promise of a decade of loneliness . . . a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair."

More recently, Fran Tarkenton of the Minnesota Vikings viewed his own 30th birthday as the time when "you know the trouble spots." It was the time when "you know what you can do and what you can't do." This year Tarkenton followed his own advice. He quit football.

For some, popular culture will provide its sympathies. There's a new market for over-30 products, models and movie stars. Last year, the Harper's Bazaar list of the 10 most beautiful women in the world included none under 30. Playboy has risked its first over-30 centerfold. Not that any of this is a consolation to Jack Weinberg, the Free Speech leader at Berkeley (it wasn't Mario Savio or Jerry Rubin) who first proclaimed the "Don't Trust Anybody Over 30" credo back in 1964. Next year, as it happens, Mr. Weinberg will turn 40.

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