

## YOUTH VOTE '08:

## McCain's TONE DEAF BUT TRYING HARD

**H**e's effeminate! He's dreamy! And he's only about 15! Is somebody finally going to call the McCain campaign and tell those people that Barack Obama isn't the fourth member of the Jonas Brothers?

I tried my best, but they wouldn't listen to me. Something about being young and inexperienced.



**David Wittenberg**

*The Witt's End*

"We believe that Barack Obama is a global celebrity who has a lot of fans out there," McCain campaign spokesperson Joe Pounder told me.

And maybe he's right. This is clearly a quality no leader of the free world should ever aspire to. Real Americans want people to hate us! We were going to nominate Oscar the Grouch, but his publicist said he was unavailable. And besides, he has too many young fans.

In any case, I'm worried about the McCain campaign. It's hard to see how the campaign's efforts to garner the youth vote aren't inexorably at odds with a message that, in painting Obama as a 'celeb' the likes of Paris and Britney, has Obama's youth and popularity with young voters as its central criticisms.

Where Obama sees a selling point, McCain sees a sneering point. And when McCain asks 'Who is this young guy who wants to be president?' he's also saying,

'Who are these kids who think they get to pick the president?'

I wonder if it would really be so bad if America's politicians attracted the same amount of attention as its doyennes of the supermarket checkout aisle. What's so bad about a politician who young people actually care about? About American politics with something in common with American Idol?

This is a classic example of the "if you can't join them, beat them" strategy. But

which the poll pegged at 11 points — remains commanding by any standard.

GOP-ers maintain the closing of the gap is a result of McCain's basic message getting through to all age groups — and of organizing efforts, both on the ground and online, that have begun to bear fruit.

The McCain campaign has a network of youth state and county chairs. But its social networking tools are unwieldy. "McCain Nation" and "McCainSpace" are idiosyncratically separate tools for fundraising and organizing. They are especially coarse when compared to the nimble, Facebook-engineered "myBarackObama," an all-in-one tool that often doubles as a raucous forum for debate.

And even if the McCain youth organizing infrastructure exists, it seems half-hearted.

Joe Pounder, the campaign spokesperson, could not provide an answer when I asked why the drop-down menu listing interest groups on McCain's site — which includes web sites for McCainiac hunters, lawyers, and Americans with disabilities — doesn't have a listing for students or youth voters.

Other online efforts McCain has to attract the youth vote are feeble. McCainBlogette.com, a comment-disabled compilation of pretty-in-pink campaign trail dispatches from McCain's 20-ish daughter (and two professional writers) is phony and forced. And Meghan McCain's efforts to turn herself into an US Weekly-style celeb by hanging out with the likes of The Hills' Heidi Montag seem at odds with the campaign strategy. Why is Mac deriding Obama's celebrity even as his daughter's courting her own?

McCain himself is barely computer literate — a fact that an embarrassing New York Times story, "McCain, the Analog Candidate," described in excruciating detail.

The bottom line is that the GOP line on youth voters contrasts starkly with its professed youth-vote strategy. Too much of McCain's try at casting Obama as a pretty boy with "dreamy eyes" and blinded-by-the-light young disciples smacks of Clinton flack Mark Penn's infamous primary derision of Obama's young supporters, saying they "look like Facebook" — not like voters.

The idea that Obama's youth support derives from his baby browns — and not from his positions on college cost, the environment, and the Iraq War — is insulting. From his position on the war to his inability to Google, McCain's not giving youth voters a very good sense of "I get you, I get where you're coming from and I get what your issues are," said Erica Williams, Policy and Advocacy Manager with Campus Progress, the legally nonpartisan grassroots organization.

The McCain campaign spokesperson, Joe Pounder, says "Americans, no matter the age, will ... see that John McCain is ready to lead this country and Barack Obama is not."

But I say, no dice. Young people want to be treated like real voters. We want real solutions on our own issues. We don't want the same old Bush-Cheney message repackaged in a pitiable attempt at Web 2.0. And we don't, for better or for worse, want a president who doesn't use email.

*The above article previously appeared on the Youth Vote '08 blog, a joint venture of the Washington Post, CBS News, and UWire. Check it out at youthvoteblog.com and youthvote.washingtonpost.com. David's column appears there weekly.*

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## THE CONSCIENCE OF A GENERATION?

**T**his summer I called Collegetown home, basking in the balmy weather as I slaved away at Intensive Latin and poured kamikazes at Dunbar's. That experience — a continuous residency in Ithaca during which I haunted the empty campus and walked the empty streets — gave me time to reflect on university life: the classes, the parties, the Facebook profiles. And so I think



**Ted Hamilton**

*A Brain In a Vat*

it's appropriate that in my first column and on this first day of class we take a step back and ask: what does it mean to be an American college student today?

The best place to look for an idea of the zeitgeist of any era is probably popular culture. So what do our cultural institutions today have to offer us in the form of self-definition? Road Trip, the "bro rape" video on YouTube, the forthcoming and aptly named College — it would appear that these years are reserved for Greek life debauchery, relentless pursuit of the one-night stand, and plenty of dick jokes. Considering that the 18-to-24 year-old demographic is the most sought-after in the entertainment industry, one might be led to believe that the media moguls are only offering what the customer wants — and maybe this type of portrayal, with its vapid and over-sexed sensibility, is really what defines us. If this is the case — if being an American college student today means you drink jungle juice and

count the notches on your belt — then the times have certainly changed. Take as an example one of the classic American bildungsromans, This Side of Paradise by F. Scott Fitzgerald. A semi-autobiographical novel published in 1920 when the author was twenty-four, it recounts the adventures of Amory Blaine as he grows up and passes through Princeton.

Amory, perhaps the emblematic college student of his day (our equivalent might be Stifler), spends a good amount of time worrying over girls and drinks his fair share of cocktails, but the overarching concern of his college years — and, one judges from the immediate and spectacular success of the novel, the overarching concern for many university students of the day — was the development of his mind and the formation of a solid character. Consider the following passage relating Amory's search for identity: "He had fallen into a deep cynicism over what had crossed his path, plotted the imperfectability of man and read Shaw and Chesterton enough to keep his mind from the edges of decadence — now suddenly all his mental processes of the last year and a half seemed stale and futile — a petty consummation of himself..."

Fretting over the imperfectability of man and reading Chesterton to cure one's soul — not exactly pounding Keystones on a Thursday night, is it? Or we could consider the most monumental epoch in the history of American college life, the 1960's — mass mobilization for political causes, major influence on the national scene, a general sentiment of relevance and authority: these elements seem to have disappeared altogether from the college scene.

Of course, all of this is drastically oversimplified. No single artifact like Fitzgerald's novel can speak for an entire culture, nor can the raunchy comedy genre today encapsulate the experiences of fifteen-odd million young people. Still,

there's no doubt that the public perception of college life has changed over the decades.

We began by asking what it means to be a college student today. Perhaps that can be best answered with another question: does it matter? Is it necessary to distill all the ways in which people live their college years into one (necessarily incomplete) picture? Is there any point in generalizing and extrapolating?

Sure there is. For one thing, humans are social creatures, and we like to create communal narratives to convey the essence of an era. Say "1930s," and people think lunch lines and dust; mention the Civil Rights Era, and you'll hear about water hoses and busing. Representative details — even those that may be apocryphal — can call an entire gamut of experiences back to life in an easily graspable form.

Another reason to try to define the zeitgeist is simply to see whether it's possible. Say our current experience — American college life in the early 21st century — has no defining characteristics. That tells us something: perhaps that university life, now open to more types of people than ever before, has manifested itself in much greater variety than ever before; perhaps that we're in need of some more cultural cohesion as a demographic group. Regardless, the process is instructive.

And there's no quick answer. Personally, I know that the depictions of college life in popular culture fall woefully short of a full picture. I also doubt that we'll have a readily accessible image of our days at school 40 years hence. Sure, we've got Facebook, cell phones, and beer pong, but that's not much. With a new year just beginning, maybe that'll start to change.

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