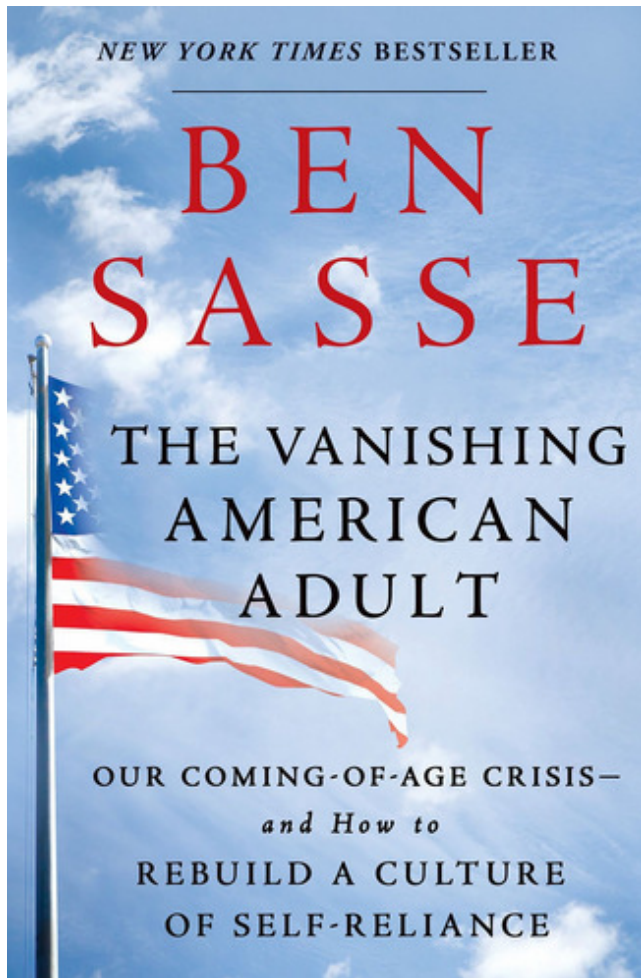


Nebraska senator tells us how to fix youth

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“The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis – and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance,” by Ben Sasse. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017, 306 pages, \$27.99 (hardbound).



“Our kids are not ready for the world they are soon going to inherit,” Ben Sasse cautions near the beginning of “The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis – and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance,” his recently-published treatise on where we went wrong in raising the current generation of Americans and, more importantly, what we can do to make a much-needed course correction.

“Everywhere I go across the country, I hear from people who share an ominous sense that something is very wrong with our kids, but they don’t always have hooks or labels or a mental framework to discuss it,” he continues. “They know that almost all of our kids seem to be distracted or drifting. They yearn for the rising generation of American teens to be grittier, more self-possessed, more self-sufficient, more ready to serve.”

Despite the negative tone surrounding how Sasse introduces the reader to his subject matter, I was pleasantly surprised at how optimistic and encouraging he becomes as he takes his exploration to a deeper and ultimately much more constructive level. Sure, he spends the first three chapters describing, in some detail, the extent of the problem as well as its origins – which are myriad

and diverse; no one is spared responsibility for the path that took us to the present moment in time. But then he proceeds to lay out a well-thought-out and somewhat meticulous plan for getting us back on track. And he makes a powerful case for the recommendations he is championing. When you boil it all down, there are five resounding themes that serve to animate his argument, including teaching our youth to overcome peer culture, value hard work, resist consumption, better distinguish between wants and needs and recognize the supreme importance of becoming truly literate.

Let me see if I can accurately predict the reaction of most readers to that last sentence: I suspect a clear majority of you put all those items in the “easier said than done” category. Rest assured, I am with the masses on this one, which is why I found Sasse’s book to be so reassuring. He has the remarkable ability to take what many would consider to be self-evident yet immensely challenging and reduce it to

a set of principles which, if employed consistently and conscientiously, will yield the results – and the future – we can conceptualize yet doubt we can achieve.

“The Vanishing American Adult” is comprised of an Introduction, nine chapters arranged in two major sections, “Part I: Our Passivity Problem,” and “Part II: An Active Program.” He also includes a postscript, “Why This Wasn’t a Policy Book,” along with an Afterword, “If Teddy Roosevelt Spoke to a High School Graduating Class,” which I found to be particularly engaging. My favorite chapter from the “how we got here” portion of the book was undoubtedly “From Little Citizens to Baby Einsteins,” probably due to the author’s discussion of behavior I see on a daily basis. Check this out and see if it rings true to your experience:

“From college students’ demands for ‘trigger warnings’ on potentially offensive literature to ‘safe spaces’ with psychological counselors at the ready in case they should encounter uncomfortable speakers or ideas, our campuses are encouraging an entitled attitude that one is ‘free from’ any duty to hear one’s beliefs challenged.” The well-taken point here is that most education tends to take place outside an individual’s ‘comfort zone,’ and only when professors are free to explore this uncharted terrain – unrestrained by the mantra that no student should ever be made to feel uncomfortable – will true learning take place. In my own experience, college caused me to re-think many of the assumptions I had been taught since birth and I would argue (although my parents might have disagreed) that this ultimately served to provide me with a more cogent, realistic and pragmatic worldview.

Sasse is currently one of two Republican Senators from Nebraska. He has degrees from Harvard University, St. John’s College and Yale University; he also spent some time at the University of Oxford. His resume includes a consultancy with the Boston Consulting Group, serving as chief of staff for the Office of Legal Policy within the U.S. Department of Justice, advising the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and counselor to the secretary at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. His academic career has involved teaching at the University of Texas at Austin, a fellowship at the University of Texas LBJ School of Public Affairs’ Center for Politics and Governance, and president of Midland University. Prior to writing this book, he co-edited “Here We Stand!: A Call from Confessing Evangelicals for a Modern Reformation,” with theologian James Montgomery Boice.

“The truly free have always required literacy,” Sasse explains in “Build a Bookshelf,” the eighth chapter and the most enlightening from the “where do we go from here” portion of the book. “There is a reason teaching slaves to read has historically been illegal across slaveholding cultures. And there are thus reasons why America’s descent toward functional illiteracy as the digital age flowers should frighten us. For the watchfulness – and thoughtfulness – of fully formed adults is the only lasting guardian of liberty.”

If you get an uneasy feeling when you see young people self-absorbed and staring at their smartphones and other devices, “The Vanishing American Adult” is definitely a book you will want to add to your reading list. “The challenges before us are not merely problems for my family or your family to solve – although they are that,” he concludes. “The coming of age crisis belongs to all of us, even those without children, for the vanishing of a shared sense of adulthood endangers the future of the republic we share.”

Luckily, Sasse provides a roadmap out of the self-destructive downward spiral we seem to be on at an ever-increasing pace. We might want to give some attention to his plan of salvation.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

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