

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Michiko Kakutani, now the principal book reviewer of *The New York Times*, has written for that newspaper since 1979. Her reviews won her the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 1998. The following passage is adapted from an essay she published in 2002.

### DEBATE? DON'T GO THERE

That familiar interjection "whatever" says a lot about the state of mind of college students today. So do the catch phrases "no problem" and "don't go there." Noisy dorm and dining room debates are no longer common, as they were during earlier decades; quiet acceptance of differing views--be they political or aesthetic--is increasingly the rule. Neil Howe and William Strauss's book *Millennials Rising*--a survey of the post-Gen X generation--suggests that the young people born in the early 1980's and afterward are, as a group, less rebellious than their predecessors, more practical-minded, less individualistic and more inclined to value "team over self, duties over rights, honor over feeling, action over words." "Much the opposite of boomers at the same age," the authors write, "millennials feel more of an urge to homogenize, to celebrate ties that bind rather than differences that splinter."

These are gross generalizations, of course, but a student's article titled "The Silent Classroom," which appeared in the Fall 2001 issue of *Amherst* magazine, suggested that upperclassmen at that college tend to be guarded and private about their intellectual beliefs. And in this writer's own completely unscientific survey, professors and administrators observed that students today tend to be more respectful of authority--parental and professorial--than they used to be, and more reticent about public disputation. "My sense from talking to students and other faculty is that out of class, students are interested in hearing another person's point of view, but not interested in engaging it, in challenging it or being challenged," Joseph W. Gordon, dean of undergraduate education at Yale, said. "So they'll be very accepting of other points of view very different from their own. They live in a world that's very diverse, but it's a diversity that's more parallel than cross-stitched."

The students' reticence about debate stems, in part, from the fact that the great issues of the day--the September 11 terrorist attacks and the war in Afghanistan--do not engender the sort of dissent that the Vietnam War did in an earlier era. It also has roots in a disillusionment with the vitriolic partisanship that held sway in Washington in the 1990's: the often petty haggling between right and left, Republicans and Democrats, during President Bill Clinton's impeachment hearings and the disputed presidential election of 2000, and the spectacle of liberals and conservatives screaming at each other on television programs like *Crossfire*. "Debate has gotten a very bad name in our culture," Jeff Nunokawa, a professor of English at Princeton University, said. "It's become synonymous with some of the most nonintellectual forms of bullying, rather than as an opportunity for deliberative democracy." He added that many of his students say that it's not politic or polite to seem to care too much about abstract issues. "Many of them are intensely socially conscientious, caring, and committed," he said. "It's just not clear precisely what they wish to commit themselves to."

Students today are more accepting of individuals different from themselves, more tolerant of other races, religions, and sexual orientations. But this tolerance of other people also seems to have resulted in a reluctance to engage in the sort of impassioned argumentation that many baby boomers remember from their college days. "It's as though there's no distinction between the person and the argument, as though to criticize an argument would be injurious to the person," said Amanda Anderson, an English professor at Johns Hopkins University and the author of a forthcoming book, *The Way We Argue Now*. "Because so many forms of scholarly inquiry today foreground people's lived experience, there's this kind of odd overtactfulness. In many ways, it's emanating from a good thing, but it's turned into a disabling thing. A lot of professors complain about the way students make appeals to relativism today. It's difficult [to criticize that appeal to relativism] because it's coming out of a genuinely pluralistic orientation and a desire to get along, but it makes argument and rigorous analysis very difficult, because people will stop and say, 'I guess I just disagree.'"

Outside the classroom, this appeal to relativism is a mindset reinforced by television shows like *Oprah* that preach self-esteem and the accommodation of others, and by the Internet, which instead of leading to a global village, has created a multitude of self-contained tribes--niche cultures in which like-minded people can talk to like-minded people and filter information that might undermine their views. What are the consequences of students' growing reluctance to debate? Though it represents a welcome departure from the polarized mudslinging of the 90's culture wars, it also represents a failure to fully engage with the world, a failure to test one's convictions against the logic and passions of others. It suggests a closing off of the possibilities of growth and transformation and a repudiation of the process of consensus building. "It doesn't bode well for democratic practice in this country," Professor Anderson said. "To keep democracy vital, it's important that students learn to integrate debate into their lives and see it modeled for them, in a productive way, when they're in school."

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### ESSAY TOPIC

Why does Kakutani deplore and decry what she perceives to be a lessened interest in discussing issues of public life? To what extent do you believe American citizens should engage in discussing, debating, and disputing about the issues of the day? Write an essay responding to these two questions. To develop your position, be sure to discuss specific examples; those examples can be drawn from any of your reading, and from your observation and experience.