

Changing Our Teens, One Family at a Time

Senator Sasse's cure for perpetual adolescence

**The Vanishing American Adult:
Our Coming-of-Age Crisis—
and How to Rebuild a Culture
of Self-Reliance**

by Ben Sasse

St. Martin's Press, 2017, \$27.99; 320 pages.

As reviewed by Paul E. Peterson

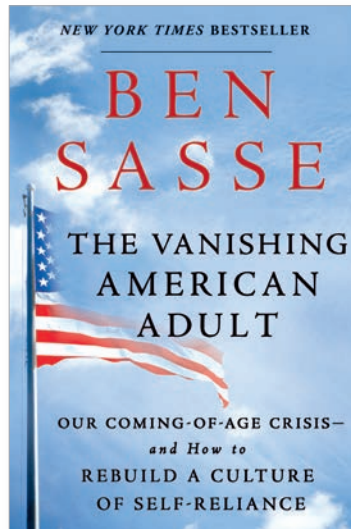
Of course, I love this book. Ben Sasse says my parents are rock stars.

A farmer's son, the junior senator from Nebraska wants young 'uns to weed soybeans—or at least do something to help the family project. My mother insisted I fold laundry, wipe dishes, and avoid trampling the carrot stalks when I was eradicating the thistles. At age 12, I began pumping gas at Dad's service station.

A father of three, Sasse discourages mindless consumption. From his perch just inside the Pearly Gates, my father is cheering. On the rare occasions when Mom wanted a new dress, he, while never blocking the purchase, reminded everyone of the family's limited budget.

A Republican and a prairie conservative, Sasse attributes adolescent laziness, promiscuity, and lack of self-confidence to television, texting, Internet games, and worse. I understand now why Mom did not allow a television set to cross our family threshold until after I had left for college.

The senator does not proselytize on behalf of his Christian faith, but he does urge families to practice their own faith, whatever it might be. He also encourages family travel, multi-generational conversations, and the



instillation of generous and empathetic impulses. Each year the Sasse family devotes at least one of its many vacations to a service project.

For this Yale-trained historian and former college president, literacy is everything. His list of recommended books is divided into a marvelously original set of categories: God, Greek Roots, Homesick Souls (conversion tales à la C. S. Lewis), the American Idea, Shakespeare, Markets, Tyrants, the Nature of Things, and American Fiction.

Sasse draws a sharp contrast between his own home-schooled, well-worked, well-traveled children and today's soft, unworked, perpetual adolescents, who play "adult" on special occasions, such as when their clothes are too stinky to leave lying around any longer.

Citing recent studies, he tells us that young people are spending "nearly two-thirds of their waking hours with their eyes tied down and bodies stationary." They read less, weigh more, and spend "more years under Mom's roof" than did their counterparts of

previous generations. They marry later in life, or never marry at all; watch pornography; receive more medication for their anxieties; attend religious services less frequently; and have become less patriotic and more inclined toward socialism.

Most of these changes, Sasse asserts, are driven by the extraordinary increase in living standards that has occurred over the past three-quarters of a century. Food is now plentiful, education is prolonged, entertainment is cheap and accessible, and the family budget no longer depends on children's contributions. As a result, traditional practices that historically helped families turn their children into adults have all but disappeared. Churches, synagogues, scouts, Big Brothers Big Sisters, even friends and neighbors have been pushed to the social margins.

Public schools have made matters worse. In Sasse's view, John Dewey is the high priest of endless adolescence. The founder of the Laboratory Schools at the University of Chicago thought schools should be responsible for the total development of the child from the cradle to . . . "whatever." Only in that way can progressive educators eradicate racist, sexist, and nationalist thistles. Today, Dewey's disciples are turning his dogma into daily practice by expanding public schooling to encompass kindergarten, preschool, pre-preschool, birthing school, before-school breakfast, school lunch, afterschool programs, and sturdy bridges from high school into safe colleges. But as their reach

extends, their practices become ever more character-crippling. Schools fail to challenge the young for fear of causing any pain. Passage from one stage to the next is automatic. Parenting has been turned over to well-meaning bureaucrats, and the results come closer to Aldous Huxley's frightful prophecies than to Dewey's sanguine expectations.

Although the author's critique is pregnant with policy implications, he offers none, perhaps in an effort to broaden the book's appeal beyond the senator's conservative Midwestern base. He presents no alternative to dependency-inducing entitlement programs. He does not endorse school vouchers, charters, or education savings accounts. He does not

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urge (as I would) that college grants and loans be withheld until students demonstrate enough competency and commitment to pass course-based external

examinations in high school.

Instead, the senator proposes to change adolescence one family at a time by extolling America as it was in many rural and small-town households at the midpoint of the 20th century. Surely, one hopes that can be done. But it takes a strong, focused family—if there is a hero in this account, it is Ben's wife, Melissa—to withstand the societal forces constructed by Hollywood, Silicon Valley, schools, and entitlements.

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