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Turning Right

Kids today are thinking different.

By Holiday Dmitri

In my adolescence, I used to consider myself a devoted lover of the Left. At 17, I presided over my high-school chapter of NOW, joined the rank-and-file of Greenpeace, and annoyed my loving parents by turning vegetarian. I was so hip, so against the grain, I was bona fide "cutting edge."

Like many teenagers who grew up in the age of Nirvana, I sported a hairdo of defiance and clung to my generation's badge of conformity — beat-up flannel shirts and Doc Martens. Anything GOP was bad news. My friends and I didn't follow politics, but we listened to punk rock, poked holes in our bodies, and branded ourselves with tattoos, which, naturally, meant we were progressive in our politics. Counterculture meant rebelling against the Establishment — the rich, stodgy men in Brooks Brothers suits, the cigar-smoking conservatives, the geriatric gentle class. As a matter of self-preservation, you conformed to nonconformity.

Then something funny happened: Conservatism became "cool." Kids today are turning right and voting Republican. Members of the cool-cognoscenti like Gavin McInnes, cofounder of the New York hipster magazine *Vice*, are proclaiming it fashionable to think like Reagan. "It seems impossible that a generation reared on free-love television and rap music, a generation far more tolerant of ethnic diversity and homosexuality than its elders, could support the GOP, whose base is anchored in the religious right," writes Mort Kondracke in the current *Roll Call*.

But believe it. On college campuses, "young Hipublicans" are taking strides in fighting the (liberal) status quo. These new conservatives inject a healthy dose of popular culture into their politics: They can defend liberty and champion individual freedom just as well as they quote Homer Simpson.

Coined by *Rolling Stone* contributing editor John Colapinto, "young Hipublicans" describes a new demographic of young right-wingers that includes a slew of women and draws some of its fiercest ideologues from the middle class. No longer the WASP, the country-club golfer, or the Bible thumper, the new conservative doesn't belong to your daddy's Grand Old — "boring" — Party, but a bold new party for a bold new generation.

Let the stats speak for themselves. In a recent poll by the Institute of Politics at Harvard, 31 percent of college students across the country now identify themselves as Republicans (27 percent of the students say they are Democrats, and 38 percent consider themselves independent or unaffiliated). The poll also reported that 61 percent of college students approve of President Bush's job performance — a number about eight-percentage-points higher than the general public. Two other studies, one done by the Gallup Organization and another by the University of California at Berkeley, found that teens now hold more conservative viewpoints than older generations on issues like abortion and prayer in school. Not since the 1980s, when Reagan triggered a youthquake of conservative campus activism, have so many kids rocked the GOP vote. Could it once again be hip to be square?

My epiphany came during freshman year in college. I took a "test" in my American-government class, one of those 60-question computerized exams created to help the ideologically challenged pinpoint where they belong on the political landscape. To my surprise, I was hailed a classical liberal — which I was told was someone who disliked government interference and loved the free market. (This later became my excuse to my Marxist friends when I would run away — as soon as possible and as fast as I could — from the socialist meetings they dragged me to. I was

allergic, I'd say, to big government.)

While attending the University of Chicago for grad school, I wrote for *The Criterion*, a too-cool-for-school conservative journal published by a group of Allan Bloom-adoring prep-school dandies. The *Criterion* boys (the board was made up of all guys, at least at that time) were hardly your run-of-the-mill, button-down cohort. These fashion-conscious provocateurs injected dirty humor and an in-your-face attitude into the pages of their publication, covering issues from the types of sexual relationships to avoid to an editorial urging the sending of campus protesters off to war. ("This [move] is good," the piece read, "for it injects energy into our self-absorbed community.")

PC campuses beware: The "under-30 generation" is rebelling against rebellion itself. Across the country, College Republicans are mobilizing. Since 1999, the College Republican National Committee has tripled its membership and now holds claim to 1,150 chapters, with more than 1,000 student coordinators on campuses nationwide. At the University of Chicago, the College Republicans have more than 30 deputy registrars conducting voter registration, and are currently running students as candidates for several local offices. Additionally, for the 2002-2003 school year, the U of C College Republicans were allocated more than \$9,000 for annual expenses, not including their speaker honoraria. In comparison (in a reverse of typical campus trends), the U of C Democrats got a measly \$92.

These facts scare some. In 60 years, no Democrat has ever won the presidency without carrying the youth vote. Imagine what would result if conservative thought seeped into the Ivory Tower! Colapinto calls it an "assault" on liberal teaching. He believes that campus conservatives — those misled souls! — are being exploited by rapacious right-wing think tanks and leadership organizations, serving as mouthpieces for their political agenda. In fact, Colapinto gives the kids no credit. According to him, a young Hipublican's "idea" of wearing recognizably "hip" clothes is the brainchild of off-campus conservative groups. Come on now, can you really see a bunch of suit-and-tie geezers legitimating street cred? I don't think so.

There are some things that change, yet stay the same. What kids want today hasn't changed much since the New Left movement in the '60s. They crave authenticity and are wary of tradition. They want to "keep it real," and they want to "keep it fresh." While conservatism may be by definition traditional, on campuses nationwide, conservative thought is often unconventional thinking.

Today professors don't think twice about openly denouncing the government or the current war. And holidays like Columbus Day are hardly celebrated anymore. (If anything, the day is mourned for lauding a "mass murderer.") But as academia turns more liberal, the student population sways the other way. One reason that College Republican membership is rising is because students are sick of being spoon-fed leftist political ideology and having to adapt to pious political correctness.

As the liberal herd mentality swells on campuses, students become more wary of groupthink and seek insurgent vision. And let's face it, it becomes cooler to break from the pack and revel as an outcast amongst the academic elites. Facilitating nonconformity, conservative concepts become emblems of revolt. The new youth movement is bound to bring energy and momentum to the Right. It's time to welcome the new face of conservatism: the rebel with a cause.

— *Holiday Dmitri is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C.*

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