
Building a Culture of Character

The following are presentations made at a panel on character at the Heritage Foundation's twenty-fifth annual Resource Bank Meeting, held in Philadelphia in April 2002.

Character, Faith, and the Future of Democracy

Joseph Loconte

Listen to what New York Assemblywoman Susan John of Rochester, chairman of the Assembly's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Committee, said after pleading guilty to driving while impaired (as reported by Reuters on March 12, 1997): "This will give me additional insights into the problem of drinking and driving, and I believe, will allow me to do my job even more effectively."

For at least thirty-five years, America has been experimenting with what I call the Milli Vanilli approach to democratic life. Remember the pop duo? They won a 1989 Grammy award for "Girl, You Know It's True." They didn't sing a note. They lip-synched their way to the Grammys, were exposed as frauds, and sheepishly gave back their award.

But we cannot lip-synch our way to a free and responsible democratic society. The Founders worried a great deal about the character issue, and they had good reason. As John Adams put it, "There

never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide."¹ They believed that only the character-shaping work of private associations—armed with a moral and religious vision and free to engage the public square—could sustain freedom over the long haul.

The Founders' understanding of faith and freedom has all but vanished from public debate. During the 2000 presidential campaign, Joseph Lieberman was scolded for praising the social benefits of religion. The *New York Times* even opined that Lieberman "crossed the boundaries of tolerance" when he cited Washington to emphasize the role of faith in producing citizens of character.²

This willful neglect of the past is cutting us off from America's most reliable sources of civic renewal. How do we recover them?

We'll look briefly at two forces—politics and pop culture—that erode character, and three correctives to that erosion.

Politics: character doesn't matter. If there's any realm of life in which "the end justifies the means" is the guiding credo, it's national politics.

This is a bipartisan problem, but it's especially acute among political liberals, who no longer see any link between good citizens and good government. "Liberals have always taken the position that democracy can dispense with civic virtue," writes social critic Christopher Lasch in his book *Revolt of the Elites*. "According to this way of thinking, it is liberal institutions, not the character of citizens, that make democracy work."³

This, of course, was the assumption of President Clinton's defenders during his impeachment crisis—that character is unimportant to leadership, that private morality can have no real public consequences. The *New York Times* editors even opined that they endorsed Mr. Clinton, aware of his personal shortcomings, but confident that he would "carve out a window of discretion for the presidential portion of his life."

Instead of a "window of discretion," Clinton opened an executive doorway to depravity. In the end, not even the rule of law would matter.

By ignoring the connection between virtue and democracy, liberals have come to idolize government. Meanwhile, they demonize government's strongest supports—religious belief and religious institutions.

Pop culture: the cult of the celebrity. We confuse fame—being well known—with greatness.

Daniel Boorstin's book *The Image*, published in 1961, remains one of the best studies of how mass media create overnight stars, devoid of character.

"Two centuries ago when a great man appeared, people looked for God's

purpose in him; today we look for his press agent," Boorstin writes. "The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name."

Ask young people who their heroes are today and you get Big Names like the Backstreet Boyz, Jennifer Lopez, Leonardo di Caprio, Howard Stern, Rosie O'Donnell. Not a hero among them. The cult of celebrity corrodes good character.

How do we cultivate virtue?

First, we need moral accountability.

By this we mean inviting people into our lives and our institutions who hold us to the highest standards of behavior. There would have been no Enron debacle, no indictments at Arthur Andersen, had there been real accountability. Moral accountability does not allow the end to justify the means; instead, it disciplines the means and often redirects our ends, our ultimate concerns.

Religious faith is crucial to this process: belief in God provides the North Star for our wandering souls. For the faithful, God is not only their guide, but also their destination. To live in His presence is to learn to be like Him. The Jewish Scriptures say, "Be Holy, for I am Holy."

That takes accountability, a clear sense of right and wrong. This partly explains the growing interest in homeschooling and in private religious schools as alternatives to the morally chaotic public classrooms. Surveys

show that at least 85 percent of all public-school parents want moral values taught in schools.⁴ But the secularized character-education movement isn't likely to meet the challenge.

Religious faith is crucial to accountability and character, but it's no guarantee. Exhibit A is the plague of child abuse that has engulfed the Catholic Church. The Catholic confessional is considered a vital means of spiritual accountability in the Church. But its presence has not prevented the shameless shuffling of Catholic priests from parish to parish, even after it was known that they were sexually molesting children.

High-ranking Boston officials vouched for the character of Paul Shanley, a priest they knew to be guilty of child abuse that occurred over a thirty-year period and who publicly defended pedophilia. Church officials told their counterparts in California that Shanley "has no problem that would be a concern to your diocese."⁵

How could it be? We can debate whether there are theological roots to this problem. And God knows it's not confined to Catholics. We cannot deny that it represents a profound failure of moral accountability. Perhaps this is what happens when religious professionals become more devoted to religion or to an institution than to God Himself.

C. S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, writes, "The fine flower of unholy-ness can grow only in the close neighborhood of the Holy. . . . Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps of the altar."⁶

Faith is never more discredited than when it's used to cover up moral weakness. Genuine faith always demands genuine accountability. The fifth step in Alcoholics Anonymous says, "Make a searching moral inventory. Then, share it with God and one other person." Not a bad recovery strategy for Enron, Arthur Andersen, or the Catholic hierarchy.

Second, we need tough-minded forgiveness. Nothing is more certain in life than the fact that people will hurt us. Biblical forgiveness takes the problem of sin and evil seriously. This is not Barney-the-dinosaur forgiveness. It doesn't condone or soft-peddle evil, but it knows how to move forward with grace.

Forgiveness is crucial both to character formation and to culture formation. Without forgiveness, people get entangled by their grievances. They become either passive victims or violent victimizers.

Recently I've been talking to ministry leaders who work with enraged and depressed adolescents, most of them "acting out" because their fathers abandoned them. Listen to the Reverend Jesse Peterson, who runs a Los Angeles program for kids in gangs: "Ninety-nine percent of the men are angry because they don't have a father in the home." How to break the grip of resentment in their lives? Faith in God, he says, which leads to forgiveness.

That's the personal. Now consider the cultural. The politics of resentment is tearing apart the social fabric. In America we get the Los Angeles race riots. Find an aggrieved minority group

and you'll find a multi-million-dollar lawsuit. Elsewhere it's the murderous violence among Hindus and Muslims in northern India. Or the Palestinian suicide bombers. That's the politics of rage. No one even mentions the word *forgiveness*.

Maybe it's time they did. Listen to these words, from a sixteen-year-old Palestinian boy in Gaza: "When there are many Palestinians who are being killed and a bombing happens in Israel, it makes us feel good. We get revenge. It creates balance. It makes us feel we are not weak. I would like to watch on TV at this moment, and see Israelis suffer."⁷

I'm not suggesting for a minute that terrorism can be overcome with warm hugs. Lethal force—lots of it—is justified and required to defeat this kind of evil. But it may not be sufficient. I don't know whether Muslims put a premium on forgiveness. It is a key concept in Judaism. And it is the central virtue of Christianity—it's what the Christian story is all about.

It was this story that surely guided President Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address. Delivered on March 4, 1865—when Union victory was assured but before the war was won—it could hardly have come at a time of greater national bitterness. In it, Lincoln clearly hints that his postwar policy would have been to treat the Southerners as if they had never left the Union:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to

care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Yes, win the war. But after that, forgiveness.

In Lincoln's America, there would have been no place for a politics of resentment. America and the world could use a few Lincoln-like statesmen.

Third, we must rediscover and honor genuine heroes. Character is not formed primarily by academic instruction in the moral virtues. It's the product of imitation: when we see real heroes in action, they "stretch our hearts and stir our minds in an effort to mimic their lives."⁸ Into their example we pour our deepest hopes and aspirations. In short, heroes help little boys and little girls become the men and women they long to be.

There's a thirst for heroes in any culture. But a society that worships celebrities, that allows the end to justify the means, or that feeds itself on resentment and rage, will produce the wrong kinds of heroes—and citizens with the wrong kind of character. In America, you get a Bill Clinton or an O. J. Simpson. In the Middle East it's Osama bin Laden or Yasser Arafat. They are celebrated, they are Great Names, but none are great men.

America, by the grace of God, can still produce great men and women. We've been reminded of that since September 11. Ask a young boy today what he wants to be when he grows up, and he'll likely tell you he wants to be

a fireman. What does he mean? What does his heart want?

Well, listen to what the New York City firefighters said in the days after that day of evil. We frequently heard this remark, in one form or another: “When people run out of burning buildings, we run in. That’s what we do.”

That’s what heroes—not celebrities—do.

Heroes live with moral courage. They find the strength to do the right thing in the face of great temptation and danger. They spend their lives—maybe risk their lives—helping people who can’t help themselves. That’s what the human heart longs for. Even a little boy or a little girl can understand something about sacrifice and goodness.

But if we want citizens like this in large numbers, we need to teach our children who and what is worthy of our praise. We need to fill their minds with memories of the good, the noble, the heroic. Many, maybe most, of the world’s greatest heroes were men and women of faith. Their trust in a loving and just God gave them the moral courage to move mountains—from a Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany to a Todd Beamer on United Flight 93. We must give the next generation a better set of heroes than the last.

Listen to Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his day.”

Accountability, forgiveness, heroes: How do we bring these remedies to bear on our common life?

We could begin by creating more public space for our religious communities—the people and institutions that know how to exert accountability, offer forgiveness, and draw our hearts to the heroic. That means taking religious freedom seriously. In education, entertainment, the arts, politics, and the way we care for the poorest among us—all of these realms can and must allow religious voices and religious values to penetrate, to have influence.

The alternative is the death of character—and, with it, God knows what else. This has always been one of the great risks of the American experiment. Ben Franklin put it bluntly: “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom.” What’s at stake, then, is liberty. Not the moral anarchy that passes itself off as freedom, but the classical American version: a liberty that grows out of the character of its citizens, inspired and restrained by religious belief.

We can’t lip-synch our way back to that kind of culture. Perhaps many of the nation’s leaders have forgotten the songs of freedom. Perhaps it will be our children who will have to teach them. Now is a good time to start.

Notes

1. Quoted in *The Great Experiment: Faith and Freedom in the American Republic* (Burke, Va.: Trinity Forum, 1999), p. x.
2. *New York Times* editorial page, August 31, 2000.

3. Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 85.
4. Jonathan Marks, "The Moralists' Gamble," *Weekly Standard*, October 30, 2000, p. 35.
5. Pam Belluck, "Boston Diocese Protected Priest Long Linked to Abuse," *New York Times*, April 9, 2002, p. A25.
6. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 172.
7. Nicholas D. Kristof, "Fatal Delusions," *New York Times*, April 9, 2002, p. A31.
8. See *When No One Sees: The Importance of Character in an Age of Image* (Burke, Va.: Trinity Forum, 2000), 5–3.

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Liberty and Moral Ecology

Samuel Gregg

When it comes to reflecting upon questions such as culture and its implications for the political order, most contemporary commentators continue to be dwarfed by the perennial genius of the nineteenth-century philosopher and French Catholic aristocrat Count Alexis de Tocqueville. For much of the twentieth century, the unique insight of Tocqueville into the importance of culture for a free society was overshadowed by those three great masters of the hermeneutics of suspicion: Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. In more recent years, however, more have begun to recognize that those who are genuinely interested in seeing freedom prevail would be

wise to look to Tocqueville's writings on American democracy as well as his reflections on *ancien régime* France. In these works, we find more than just a sophisticated analysis of the particular problems confronting two quite different societies. Instead, we begin to recognize that it is **culture** rather than economics that will determine whether freedom will prevail or wither, for, as Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger of Paris once observed, it is culture rather than economics that rules the world.¹

Perhaps the most telling evidence of the centrality of culture for a free society is provided by those societies that, for many years, were decidedly unfree. Between 1933 and 1939, Germany's moral culture was transformed from one profoundly marked by a Judeo-Christian ethic to one in which there was relatively little resistance to attempts to exterminate entire categories of people. The fact that German law actually forbade many of the actions of the Nazi regime—ranging from its deadly euthanasia and eugenics programs, to the infamous 1941 Commissar order, to the moral catastrophe of Auschwitz—did little to prevent the regime from pursuing such policies. The slow but gradual changes in the moral-cultural environment in which Germans moved, lived, and had their being made **real** the possibility of such barbarism.²

Likewise, we know that seventy years of communism profoundly affected the moral ecology of many European nations. For the most damaging aspect of communism was not economic. It was not even political. Instead, the greatest damage was moral. How do we know

this? Part of the answer lies in reflecting upon some of the mistaken presumptions of Westerners who traveled to Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, confident that the road to a free society lay in the rapid privatizing of industries, the protection of private property, and the establishment of rule of law.

In hindsight, we now know that such ideas reflected a certain blindness to communism's damage to the moral ecology of these nations. The establishment of rule of law, private property, and market exchange are part of the way to a free society. But they cannot and do not suffice in themselves. Indeed, in several former communist countries, it is not the free economy that reigns, but rather the black market. The rule of law is routinely flouted, organized crime flourishes, and private property rights remain uncertain. In no way can these be called free societies. They border, in fact, upon being kleptocracies.

These questions thus arise: How do we develop a moral ecology appropriate for a free society? Do we simply expect it to evolve spontaneously from nowhere, or is a more proactive role needed?

The answer is surely the latter. Though many may disagree with the efficacy of law, it *does* influence a society's moral culture. For law is more than simply a question of neutral procedures. "Law is," as St. Thomas Aquinas stated, "nothing other than an ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated by him who has the care of the community."³ *All* laws, even the most procedural, reflect in some way a view about the good. Even those who main-

tain that law should aspire to moral neutrality are, in fact, advocating a moral position inasmuch as they believe that it is *good* for law to be neutral.

It would, however, be imprudent to rely simply on law to facilitate the moral ecology required by a free society. Again, Tocqueville points us in the right direction by reminding us of the vital importance of those intermediate organizations and associations that we often collectively group under the title of "civil society." In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville observed that the moral culture of the American society of the 1830s, with its emphasis upon individual initiative, self-responsibility, and moral absolutes, was upheld and profoundly shaped by the vast network of voluntary associations and institutions that permeated American life.⁴ Moreover, Tocqueville recognized that this moral culture had profound consequences for the political order. He noted, for example, that the Mexican Republic that bordered the American states had adopted a constitution remarkably similar to that of the United States.⁵ A greater contrast than that between Mexico's constant veering between anarchy and arbitrary rule, and the free order that characterized America could not be imagined. The most plausible explanation for the different social orders of the two countries, in Tocqueville's view, was the different social mores and habits characterizing each country and its history.

Looking at the present, one wonders if Tocqueville would have anticipated the extent to which so many institutions of civil society in the United

States have become debilitated. Sadly, many such organizations are increasingly limited in their willingness—let alone their ability—to contribute to the type of moral ecology required by liberty. The only commonality churches that have followed liberal theological paths appear to share is an incoherent approach to morality that is characteristic of what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre calls “emotivism.”⁶ “Liberal Christianity’s” replacement of the transcendental beliefs and the moral absolutes contained in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Gospels with the language of feelings, personal experience, and therapy-speak has only done harm to the moral culture. Likewise, many civil liberties associations, not to mention much of the legal profession, have become captive to the once peculiarly American but now increasingly international phenomenon of “rights-talk.” Much of this is characterized by an inability to explain the origin and source of rights, for this would be to admit that rights need to be grounded in moral objectivity, and moral objectivity is something that the skeptical mind is simply unwilling to accept.

Similarly, many American universities are even further away today from John Henry Newman’s vision of communities where people have the opportunity to pursue knowledge of truth. Only in our own time do we find, for example, academics and lawyers earnestly using the language of rights while simultaneously insisting that there are no moral truths. Robert P. George correctly notes that no secular

thinker has provided “any plausible account of where rights come from or why we should respect others’ rights.”⁷ As the late English philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe pointed out, modern philosophy cannot provide a moral account of anything insofar as it declines to—and cannot—identify an ultimately authoritative source of moral goodness.⁸ One need only think of all the unsuccessful modern attempts to establish a foundation for rights: the command of the sovereign; the majority of voters; judgments of the U.S. Supreme Court; and, perhaps most bizarrely, John Rawls’s imaginary social contract that abstract nonexistent persons might adopt in an equally imaginary “original position.”⁹

It would, of course, never have occurred to the American Founders to claim rights that were not grounded in truth. The contemporary elevation in the universities of sincerity over truth has dismembered the classic differentiations between the ethical and the aesthetic, objectivity and subjectivity, reason and feelings, male and female, and even human and animal. These distinctions are commonly understood as “Western,” “linear,” “patriarchal,” “logocentric” illusions that screen the exercise of power. The hold that contemporary tenured neo-Freudians, Gramscian-Marxists, and deconstructionists have established on much of the humanities—where they teach their self-described “anti-foundational,” “post-moral” faith in self-will alone—is frightful. Their interest is generally not in discovering the truth, not least because they hold that there

is no truth to be known. The only truth—the god—of these modern-day Nietzscheans is relativity and the exercise of power for its own sake. Their challenge is not just to the content of the university curriculum, but to the very conceptions of rationality, truth, objectivity, and reality that have formed the foundations of higher education for centuries. As a result, we cannot now even agree in the West what constitutes a human being and when human life begins.

The irony, of course, is that when it comes to understanding the significance of culture for the political order, the political and intellectual left has generally exhibited greater awareness of its importance. This recognition is traceable to the little-known Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who was imprisoned by Mussolini in the 1920s and died just after being released from prison in the 1930s. Like all Marxists, Gramsci was faithful to the classic goal of a communist society. But in his primary work, *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci argued that the way to establish such a society was for the left to capture the cultural institutions of civil society that, in his view, bolstered the power of the dominant classes. Once the noneconomic institutions of civil society—such as the universities, the churches, and the press—had been captured, then the intellectual framework underpinning the established social order would collapse.¹⁰ Hence, one might say that Gramsci essentially showed the left a new way to power, a path that might well be called, to paraphrase Mao, a long march through the institutions.

If this analysis of the importance of culture for the free society is true, then, to ask the question posed by both St. Luke and Lenin, what is to be done? The approach of “culture war” advocated by some will, one suspects, tempt many to embrace the confrontational approach that characterizes those who desire a truth-free, content-free world. Culture war also encourages people to think that the end justifies the means—a tendency that can only end in a person’s moral self-annihilation. In the end, there is no simple answer to the question of how we renew the moral culture required by an authentically free society. It involves, for example, ensuring that the voice of liberty and truth is heard within legislatures, courts, churches, and universities. It also necessitates opening people’s eyes to the intellectual riches bequeathed to us by our forebears. In the final analysis, however, all such approaches are dependent upon our personal willingness to seek truth, to know truth, and then to *live* in the truth. For while no one individual can single-handedly prevent the emergence of a culture of decay, a culture of decrepitude, and a culture of death, each one of us *can* refuse to contribute to its development. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn stated in his Nobel Prize lecture:

There is one simple step a simple courageous man can take—not to take part in the lie, not to give his support to false actions. Let this principle [i.e., the lie that masks the evil] enter the world and even dominate the world—*but not through me*.¹¹

Notes

1. Cited in George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of John Paul II* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 378.
2. See Joseph Boyle, "Natural Law and the Ethics of Tradition," in Robert P. George, ed., *Natural Law Theory: Contemporary Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 19–21; and Hugh G. Gallagher, *By Trust Betrayed: Patients, Physicians and the License to Kill in the Third Reich* (New York: Vandamere Press, 1995).
3. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q.90, a.4.
4. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, tr. G. Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer, Part II (New York: Perennial Classics, 2000), pp. 509–25.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
6. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 22–34.
7. Robert P. George, "A Clash of Orthodoxies," *First Things* 95 (1999), p. 35.
8. See G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958), p. 11.
9. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 118–94.
10. See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 76–98.
11. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Prize Lecture*, Section 7, tr. N. Bethell (London: Stenvalley Press, 1973), p. 53.

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Character and the Destiny of Free Government

Matthew Spalding

The remarkable generation that built this great nation led a daring revolution against the strongest military power in the world. They declared American independence based on self-evident truths, asserted a new ground of political rule in the sovereignty of the people, and launched an experiment in self-government. Through a carefully written constitution that limits power and secures rights while allowing for change through its own amendment, they created an enduring framework of republican government that allows their posterity to enjoy the many blessings of liberty. Yet for all of their accomplishments, they could not guarantee the success of their handiwork.

As he departed the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin was asked if the framers had created a monarchy or a republic. "A republic," he famously replied, "**if you can keep it.**" In the end, Franklin and the other Founders knew full well that it would always be up to future generations to keep alive what they had created. "The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the republican model of government," George Washington observed in his First Inaugural Address, "are justly considered as **deeply**, perhaps as **finally**, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people." The success of the American experiment in self-government ultimately depended not on the precision of our laws, the strength

of our economy, or the extent of our military power, but on the character of our citizenry.

The American Founders knew that one of the greatest bulwarks of our character as a self-governing people is our limited government. Limited government is necessary to protect liberty and what we today call civil society, what President Bush has called our communities of character—families, churches, volunteer organizations, schools. But they also knew, following political thinkers back to Plato and Aristotle, that law plays a key role in the formation of character, as it shapes the habits and mores of citizens. As a result, although they recognized the need for government to take account of man's self-interest and not rely too much on virtue, they designed laws that would encourage certain virtues and good habits of government.

Consider the Constitution. The separation of powers and the system of checks and balances thwart governmental despotism and promote responsibility in public representatives. At the same time, the legitimate constitutional amendment process allows democratic reform at the same time that it elevates the document above the popular passions of the moment, thereby encouraging deliberation and patience in the people. The law inspires caution and encourages mutual checks in our representatives and thereby confines them to their constitutional responsibilities and prevents a spirit of encroachment by government. The people learn from the lawmaking process to curb their own passions for

immediate political change and abide by the legitimate legal process. The demands of good public policy cause the people to be moderate and circumspect. Good opinions in the people, and good government, have a complementary effect on politics.

Nevertheless, the Founders did not believe that the new institutional arrangements were sufficient by themselves to define and maintain the type of character necessary for republican government. They knew that a constitution, no matter how well constructed, does not remove the need for good citizens and sound morals. At the end of the American Revolution, James Madison wrote for Congress an Address to the States that concludes with a warning that still rings true:

The citizens of the United States are responsible for the greatest trust ever confided to a political society. If justice, good faith, honor, gratitude and all the other qualities which ennoble the character of a nation and fulfill the ends of government be the fruits of our establishments, the cause of liberty will acquire a dignity and lustre, which it has never yet enjoyed, and an example will be set, which cannot but have the most favourable influence on the rights of Mankind. If on the other side, our governments should be unfortunately blotted with the reverse of these cardinal virtues, the great cause which we have engaged to vindicate, will be dishonored and betrayed; the last and fairest experiment in favor of the rights of human nature will be turned against them; and their patrons and friends exposed to be insulted and silenced by the votaries of tyranny and usurpation.

Hence Franklin's second clause: a republic, **if you can keep it**. Republican government is possible only if the **private** virtues needed for civil society and self-government remain strong and effective. The civic responsibility and moderation of public passion also require the moderation of private passion through the encouragement of individual morality. And the best way to encourage morality is through the flourishing of religion and the establishment of traditional moral habits. "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity," Washington wrote in his Farewell Address, "religion and morality are indispensable supports." Religion and morality aid good government by teaching men their moral obligations and creating the conditions for decent political life. Thomas Jefferson, the great defender of rights and liberty, put it bluntly when he said that the American people "are inherently independent of **all but the moral law**" (the emphasis is added).

And when it comes to politics proper, the demands of character are all the more challenging. George Washington, in his First Inaugural Address, argued that the constitutional arrangements of republican government depend on virtue and character in the people in general and in our leaders in particular. Making only a passing reference to the Constitution, Washington focused instead on "the talents, the rectitude, and the patriotism"—that is, the character—of those selected to devise and adopt the laws. It is here, and not in the institutional arrangements or mea-

asures themselves, that he saw the "surest pledges" of wise policy. The individual character of the representative was the best guarantee that "the foundation of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality."

The simple lesson is that there was no radical distinction, as there is today, between private morality and public character. These realms, private and public, are fundamentally connected and intertwined. Only if we can govern ourselves, restraining our individual passions and wants, can we as a people be capable of self-government. Moral character, understood as the ability to restrain the passions and maintain good habits, is necessary for the preservation of free government, and hence the safety and happiness of the American people. It is in this sense that **self**-government and the governing of one's own passions necessarily precedes **free** government.

At the same time, civil society requires free government (the political process by which equal citizens rule and are ruled in turn) because it not only allows and encourages but also provides the stage for and spotlights the fully developed moral character. It is in the nature of man to be political, which is to say that the rational and communicative nature of man requires relationships with others—from families and friendships to active participation in the political community—for the perfection of the human virtues.

But it is the connection between limited, constitutional government and a thriving civil society that is key. Each

needs the other, and neither can survive on its own. Together—and only together—we are able to build, or in our case rebuild, a culture of character.

This understanding of things, which is encapsulated in the Declaration of Independence, generally held from the time of the Founding through the nineteenth century. It was toward the end of the nineteenth century, during what is referred to as the Progressive Era, that it was replaced by a different view. In the minds of the new thinkers, this shift marked the end of the old order and the birth of a new republic. The Constitution was alleged to be a reactionary document designed to thwart democratic principles and opinion; the progressives wanted to reinvent the old Constitution as “a living document” capable of change, growth, and adaptation. Their objective was to transform the old constitutional system into a genuine democratic instrument of liberal social reform.

What does this have to do with the question of character? The shift from a constitutional system of limited government to an administrative system for the sake of progressive social policy also entails a shift from an emphasis on the moral character of individual citizens to the evolving ideals of the social community. In the old system, character was needed to moderate the passions of human nature and dampen their influence, thereby allowing for deliberate self-government and the thriving of civil society.

But with the new system, there is little concern with moral character and little worry about emancipating the passions. This is for two reasons. First,

progressive liberalism is built upon the philosophy of moral relativism and thus rejects distinctions between good and bad; the moral virtues—those habits and perfections that implied a distinction between virtue and vice, right and wrong—are relegated to the realm of private opinion and personal values. And second, the problems caused by “bad character” are to be solved—or, more precisely, overcome—by more democracy, more progress, and more government. It is no longer the purpose of government to restrain the passions and secure unalienable natural rights. Free government comes to mean the value-free pursuit of self-realization, and the new purpose of government is to assure an ever expanding notion of civil rights and government entitlements.

The progressive argument in favor of replacing the old order (including the old morality) with a liberal state oriented toward social progress has been overwhelmingly successful, and has transformed our politics, and our character. Governing has become obscure, incomprehensible, and at the same time petty and small-minded, inviting and encouraging interest groups instead of deliberation and responsibility. The current system encourages habits and forms a character incompatible with republican government by feeding entitlements rather than checking the narrowest passions of self-interest. More important is the effect the new view has had on our understanding of moral character. According to the new version, an unbreachable wall separates private character (which is personal, and

value-laden) and public character (which is political, and socially oriented). And there are new value-neutral virtues, such as toleration, empathy, and sincerity.

There is a deeper problem as well. Not only does progressive liberalism deny a substantive role for morality in public life, but the extended reach of the state has forced traditional morality—the ground of the old idea of character—into a smaller and smaller private sphere. The sharp distinction between public and private, accompanied by the expansion of the governmental sphere, points toward the privatization of morality. If all values are relative, and freedom now means liberation of the human will, it is hard to see any restraints on individual choice. The effect that this combination has had on education, religion, and the family—with the rise of illegitimacy and the breakdown of marriage—has been devastating.

All is not despair, however. There is reason for some optimism. Gertrude Himmelfarb and Charles Murray—our greatest social observers, who have been skeptical about our accomplishments to date in effecting moral recovery—both point to fragmentary evidence of moral improvement. Murray, for example, has pointed to what he calls “the partial restoration of traditional society”—that is, the return to traditional moral viewpoints that began to be rejected in the 1960s. Specifically, he has called attention to evidence pointing to a rise in educational standards, the onset of a religious revival, and a return to traditional sexual and

marital behaviors. Himmelfarb agrees that a reaction is taking place against what she regards as the “dominant ethos” of moral permissiveness. And the reaction—the return toward more traditional, less permissive morality—is taking place “among young people who will shape the culture of the future.”

The revival of a culture of character is assuredly the greatest task we face today. Looking ahead, if we wish to proactively rebuild a culture of character and not merely wait for trends to turn our way, we must reject the core principles and moral relativism of progressive liberalism. We must also restore the argument of the American Founders that it takes both the workings of limited government and the proper dispositions and habits of the people to form good government and good character. This means that we must break down the administrative state so as to rebuild constitutional government, on the one hand, and actively encourage the revival of the true institutions of civil society—families, churches, and schools—so as to rebuild the moral character of our citizens, on the other.

Although it was at a terrible cost, the events of September 11 dealt a significant blow to the philosophy of moral relativism. It is hard to deny that there is evil in the world, and that there is good. Perhaps this moment of resolve can be transformed into a new era of responsibility and the revival of the American character. We must never forget, especially at times like these, that the “preservation of the sacred fire of

liberty, and the destiny of the republican model of government,” as Washington reminds us, are staked on the experiment entrusted to our hands. How we proceed, as a people and as a nation, will largely determine our future, and the fate of free government.

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Our Heritage of Voluntary Action

Don Eberly

We’re making a certain amount of headway in helping people understand again the animating first political principles of the American experiment. I don’t know that we have made much headway in helping them appreciate the role that sentiments and mores and attitudes and habits had in the design of our Founders. In their minds, it was not just important that we had a constitutional government; it was also important in their eyes that we had, and should continue to have, a thriving civil society focused on human freedom. But that freedom was understood to be fairly narrow. It wasn’t something that came easily, and it took a tremendous amount of work. It was not a matter of debate during that time: freedom required character and virtue. That’s a message we should take to our generation. Wherever you’re coming from politically in America, I think it’s fair to say that people do care

about freedom. But we ought to start talking about the demands and the obligations and the personal responsibilities that are required to preserve freedom. We must create, or perhaps we should say re-create, a culture of character.

John Adams once said that the Constitution was made for a moral and religious people and is wholly inadequate for any other. The question for our time is not only how to sustain character but also how to recover it if it is lost. From the very first American settlement, this work of maintaining character was done—and the work of recovering it will be done—by civil society.

America succeeded early on because it created a culture that expected, encouraged, and rewarded virtue and character. Indeed, the first institutions built on the frontier after the land was cleared were schools and churches.

MaryAnn Glendon of Harvard often says that if history teaches us anything, it is that American constitutional government cannot be taken for granted. Our political order is dependent upon conditions that are more or less cultural in nature, having to do mostly with character. If we’re concerned about character, we must take a deep interest in character-shaping institutions. Character is not something that we simply inhale from the air. It is not something that we teach; it’s not just about pedagogy.

Character must be cultivated through formative institutions. We as a society are obsessed with freedom of

conscience, but we have very little idea about the cultivation of conscience, which requires real institutions to be functioning: Families. Fathers. Schools. Places of worship. Neighborhood groups that care about safety and order and standards. Role models and moral exemplars in the culture.

Alexis de Tocqueville is the person among many observers of American life who exactly understood the unique moral principles of America. He was also a great student of social history. His great observation was that Americans of all ages, at all stages in life and all types of dispositions, are forever forming associations of a thousand different types: religious, moral, serious, futile, very general, very limited, immensely large, very minute. Americans combined to found seminaries, build churches, distribute books. Hospitals, prisons, and schools took shape this way. If Americans wanted to proclaim a truth or propagate some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they formed an association. These associations, Tocqueville argued, were indispensable. All other forms of social and political progress depended upon these unique voluntary associations—not only because they meet thousands of local practical and charitable needs and help moralize communities, but also because they are little schools of citizenship, and thus help in the formation of our democratic character. In forming voluntary associations we developed our civic habits and defined our character.

This is an idea that Tocqueville borrowed in part at least from Edmund

Burke, who said that the “little platoon” we belong to in society is the first link in the chain by which we proceed toward a love of our country and of mankind generally. Out of our love for and our loyalty to the little platoon grows our sense of service and duty toward persons in the immediate sphere of our lives—our families, neighborhoods, local communities. This sense of duty extends to the love of mankind and love of country. These little associations and institutions cultivate the kind of habits and sentiments that the American Founders were talking about. Burke went on to say that these subdivisions are actually partnerships, not just between the living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to come. They are the spiritual, moral, and political communities that are essential to the preservation of our system.

I want to be practical about this. Far from being anti-politics, I understand politics as a noble calling. Citizenship entails important formal political responsibilities. But in a well-ordered society, the lawmaking function is peripheral to much of the pulsing life of society. Too many in our generation have assumed that if you’re going to improve society, you must first turn to politics—meaning parties, interest groups, coalitions, and the lawmaking process. This is part of the answer. But if the big issues of our time have to do with values, attitudes, habits, and beliefs, we will be more concerned about our character-shaping institutions. In regard to the institutions of civil society, government should

concern itself mostly with doing no harm and, where it is appropriate, empowering nongovernmental institutions to do their jobs better.

The greatest model of how civil society can be brought to bear upon one of the most difficult political problems of the time can be seen in the example of William Wilberforce, the British member of Parliament who successfully campaigned over the course of forty years to fully eradicate the slave trade. At the time, the slave trade traversed the globe and was as large as today's defense industry. It was ferociously defended by numerous economic sectors that profited from it and was permitted by the general moral laxity of the time. The times were characterized by high rates of crime, drunkenness, and general disregard for standards. Public confidence in laws was at an all-time low, and there was widespread political corruption. Wilberforce knew that government action against slavery was impossible short of a massive shift in the moral attitudes and habits of the people, so he set forth two great objects: reforming the manners and morals of the people, and abolishing the slave trade. A strategy for reformation that started with lawmaking was guaranteed to fail. Wilberforce was merely acknowledging what others in history had observed: law has an instructive and influential role in the course of a culture, but laws are to a large extent a reflection of the culture.

Law, in the end, is downstream from the culture. When the mores shift, the laws almost inevitably shift along with

them. Edmund Burke said that manners are more important than laws because the laws in great measure depend upon manners. Plato said, "Give me the songs of a nation—it matters not who writes the laws." We must conclude as Wilberforce concluded that if we are going to change law, we must go upstream to the tributaries of moral beliefs and conduct. This work will be done not by the state but by various voluntary associations within civil society. Over the course of three decades, William Wilberforce personally founded and participated in as many as sixty-seven voluntary associations aimed at the reform of manners and morals. His work and the work of those like him resulted in one of the most dynamic chapters in the history of voluntary reform societies.

President Bush in his campaign declared his desire to bring about changes in social policy grounded in the idea that, in dealing with poverty, we ought to go first to the neighborhood healers. We ought to learn first from those frontline antipoverty workers who understand how to treat the poor—body, mind, and soul—and who understand how to use neighborhood-based solutions. These people understand that to experience genuine transformation, individuals must be restored as persons and restored in relationship to their families, neighborhoods, communities, and places of worship. Our goal is to reverse the pattern of the prior half century, moving away from the top-down, rule-driven bureaucratic approach to one that actually learns from, is

instructed by, and seeks to capture these transforming elements in the communities of America.

The administration is involved in the early stages of a major overhaul of how we promote international economic development by developing the fruits of civil society in other countries. For too long our policies abroad were yielding the same failed dependency, producing results that our policies at home had been producing. The Millennium Compact will bring dramatically new terms and conditions for our programs abroad. First of all, we will withdraw aid from governments that are corrupt and refuse to reform themselves. In all too many cases, our own policies perpetuate rather than reverse corruption, and this is a serious problem. We must also link economic progress to democratization and good governance. Our policies should encourage prosperity by increased trade, open markets, increased direct private investment, and expanded entrepreneurship, but they must also advocate American democratic values, the rule of law, open and accountable government, and human rights. In order to do this, we need to bypass

bureaucracies and international technocrats and work with citizens and local community-building groups—including faith-based organizations—to build local capacity around the world, shifting our emphasis away from what we can do for people to what people can and want to do for themselves. We must treat people as partners in their own development. Every person, every community, and every country has untapped capacity—and transformative powers.

The rule of voluntary associations must guide our thinking as we look at social policy today, both at home and abroad. American history is filled with remarkable success stories, and this heritage of voluntary action offers important insights into how we might promote cultural renewal. Private voluntary organizations form the very basis of America's remarkable capacity to renew itself. Our policy should be to unleash that capacity to renew our country and revive freedom around the world.

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