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"Transforming America"

Kay C. James
Former Virginia Secretary of Health
and Human Resources

Kay C. James was appointed by Virginia Governor George Allen as secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources in 1994. In this position, which she held until January 1, 1996, she had responsibility for fourteen state agencies and nearly twenty thousand employees.

She has also served as senior vice president of the Family Research Council, associate director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, assistant secretary for public affairs at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and as a member of the National Commission on Children and the White House Task Force on the Black Family.

Mrs. James has published two books: an autobiography entitled *Never Forget* (1993) and *Transforming America: From the Inside Out* (1995). ▲



*What do we do about the breakdown of the traditional family and the precarious future of our children? Perhaps no one has provided a more thoughtful—or provocative—answer to this question than Virginia's Secretary of Health and Human Services Kay C. James. She delivered these remarks, based on her recent book *Transforming America: From the Inside Out*, at Hillsdale College's Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Educating for Virtue," in October 1995 in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.*

An old African proverb has been the mainstay of liberal social science conferences for years: *It takes a village to raise a child*. Not surprisingly, even First Lady Hillary Clinton is using it in her forthcoming book. Its message seems clear: *We are all in this together*. Three fundamental problems arise with the use of this proverb. First, children do not belong to the *village* or to the community or to the government. They belong to parents and the *village* exists as a resource for these families. Second, even if we did believe this to be true, the *village* no longer exists. And third, what the *village* liberals seek to build is, in truth, simply big government.

The proverb summons up a cozy image of all the different segments of society gathering around the innocent babe, protecting it, teaching it, loving it. And as the child grows, the *village* grows with it. The *village* is there to guide the child on life's path. The *village* is there for the child should the child fall. The *village* is where all the children will eventually marry and have children of their own, completing a cycle of harmony and knowledge. In trying to name this *village*, I hope the social scientists considered "Potemkin" because, just as the Soviets

used the original Potemkin villages—which were complete shams—to mask the disharmony of their society, this *village* suffers from incurable dysfunction.

It seems that the more our families disintegrate, the more violence explodes in our homes and on our streets, the more our schools fail the grade, the more this old proverb is repeated. Conference after conference, talk after talk, and book after book have discussed the importance of the *village* in raising children. It is really quite simple, we are told: If only the *village* would meet its responsibility to its children, all would be well. Children would no longer grow up insecure or worried; they would be well adjusted, well developed, and full of healthy self-esteem. What a wonderful world it would be...

When I was raised, the community supported the family and helped when help was needed. But can we say the same today? Where once neighbors and friends comprised a community, now we are afraid to walk down our own street. Where once the only way to meet the enormous challenges of being black in America meant reliance upon fellow African Americans, today the rate of black-on-black violence has reached epidemic proportions. Previously, families facing hard times could rely upon relatives and friends to help make it; today the sight of homeless men, women, and even children is all too common.

What does this say about our *village*? It says it is gone; that it has been utterly and completely destroyed. Worse, all of the effort and money that has been thrown at our social problems has done little to halt its destruction.

Ironically, the architect of so much of this failed social experimentation, President Lyndon B. Johnson, recognized both the problem and the solution thirty years ago when he stated:

“The family is the cornerstone of our society. More than any other force, it shapes the attitudes, the hopes, the ambitions, and the values of the child. And when the family collapses it is the children that are usually damaged. When it happens on a massive scale, the community itself is crippled. So, unless we work to strengthen the family, to create conditions under which most parents will stay together, all the rest—schools,

playgrounds, public assistance and private concern—will never be enough.”

Unfortunately, rather than work to rebuild the *village*, we have instead taken the broken bricks of families, the mortar of cultural institutions, and the steel of houses of worship and used them to build up Town Hall. Too many of our “leaders” confidently make the claim that where our community has failed, government can and should step in. But reflect upon the state of our community today and you will see what I mean: Town Hall has been a poor replacement for the institution that makes up a *village*.

Not only is Town Hall a poor replacement, it has played a major role in destroying the *village*. Dependency upon what government offers—whether empty rights or degrading welfare—has robbed us of the drive so necessary to sustain and strengthen the institutions of the *village*.

Failed Policies for a Failed Premise

The *village* cannot raise a child. Children do not belong to the community. Children belong to the parents who tuck them in at night, wipe away their tears, feed them, and guide them through life. The *village* can ultimately complement or undermine the lessons and values of home. If the experience of the past thirty years, current research, and the observations of individuals like former Vice President Quayle have taught us anything, it is that stable, intact, two-parent families are the foundation for a healthy *village*. As Pope John Paul II notes, “The first and fundamental structure for ‘human ecology’ is the family, in which man receives his first ideas about truth and goodness and learns what it means to love and be loved, and thus what it means to be a person.”

But what would happen to a child who grows up believing in this *village*—that whole families are not important and that the *village* will care for him and give him identity?

What would happen to the *village* if churches taught that truth does not exist—that God is really just the creation of a species of animals desperate to justify their own existence—and that *what* you believe does not have to impact *how* you behave? I

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think that the church would have very little relevance to the lives of the children and that they would seek meaning and significance in marches, cults, and communes.

What would happen to the *village* if we decided to redefine families rather than rebuild them? Research tells us and experience shows us that we would gradually see the demise of the two-parent family, as well as a rapid rise in the number of out-of-wedlock births, abortions, abused and abandoned children, increased criminal activity, and lower educational outcomes.

What would happen if the little red schoolhouse in the *village* started teaching that children should be judged not by what they learn in reading, writing, and arithmetic, but by social outcomes such as how well they get along with the other children and how well they display the attitudes and behavior that the educational establishment decides are important? Our children would grow up preoccupied about their self-esteem but ultimately unable to function and without the learning tools to compete in the liberal's global *village*.

What would happen to the *village* if the most important institution of society, the one upon which everyone depends, were the government? It is plainly evident that government would grow and grow. The Town Hall would dominate the center of our *villages*, taking more ownership over all aspects of our lives—perhaps even telling us what kind of medical treatment we may have or where we should send our children for day care. And, in doing so, it would consume more personal income and create an exploding deficit.

Misguided Compassion

What would happen if all of these things occurred at the same time? Today in America, we are seeing the answer to that question played out in front of our very eyes. Just look to our nation's cities—the great laboratories for this social experimentation. Liberal theology has undermined our faith and destroyed the traditional role of churches. Liberal education policies have ravaged our public schools. Liberal social policies have sabotaged our families. Liberal

public policies have fostered welfare dependency, encouraged promiscuous behavior, and empowered criminals instead of citizens.

Along with the gradual bankrupting of our government, we are witnessing the weakening of our corporate ability to fight off societal infections such as violence, hopelessness, hatred, promiscuity, and despair. These “infections” are not new problems; many have been with us for centuries. Proportionally, some may even be less of a problem today than they were one hundred or one thousand years ago. However, our ability to withstand these infections is dramatically reduced by the destruction of the traditional reaffirming institutions of the *village*. In a sense, we are battling a cultural form of AIDS.

Just as the HIV virus attacks those parts of the human body that defend against disease, so, too, has this cultural virus attacked what 19th-century French observer Alexis de Tocqueville called the “values-generating” or values-defending institutions of society—the vital components of the *village*. Steadily, we have seen the most important institutions of society systematically weakened. Individuals, families, communities, churches, and schools are all less healthy in 1995 than they were ten, fifteen, or thirty years ago. While for all the obvious reasons we certainly do not want to go back thirty years, we do want to keep those things that are good, honest, virtuous, and sustaining. Those things should remain the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Those things give us hope and meaning. However, like the “opportunistic infections” that infect the human body, the *village* is being ravaged by infections that numb the senses—murders, rapes, thefts, rampant promiscuity, and moral relativism.

For those who doubt, watch just one segment of CNN's *Headline News*. Flip through just one issue of *Time* or *Newsweek*. Page through just one edition of your morning newspaper. Listen to the morning news on your radio when you drive to work or clean the house. And if you want to see what is to come, listen to some of the popular songs on the radio. Watch some of the movies at the cinema. I guarantee that what you will see, hear, and read will frighten you. And well it should.

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Real Solutions

To those who say that the solutions to our problems lie somewhere in the political arena, somewhere in the economic arena, somewhere in just educating people, somewhere in the crime bill, somewhere in health care reform, or somewhere in public policy, I say the reality could not be more different or more difficult!

The real solutions are not political. The political system is but a subset of the culture and only affects certain areas. It will not fundamentally change this country, or bring it back to where it needs to be. If only it were that simple. We should remember abolitionist Frederick Douglass's admonition that "the life of the nation is secure only while the nation is honest, truthful and virtuous."

Just as the medical researchers of today are seeking ways to build up the cells that prevent infectious diseases from attacking the body, so, too, we must seek to rebuild our social immune system—those cultural institutions that have protected us. That means some pretty tough medicine for all of us. It means that we must be people of virtue. The bottom line is this: We need to get out of our easy chairs—love and discipline our children, be involved in our schools, be faithful to the call of God in our lives, be ethical in our businesses, and be involved in our communities. Doing these things is *the only way* we can reclaim our culture and rebuild our corporate *village* and therefore our country...from the inside out.

When you look back at major cultural shifts and social reforms in our history, they were usually started by one person or a small group of people. Even the birth of this great nation had its roots in a small band of patriots who believed fervently in the everlasting principles of freedom.

The effort needed to rebuild the *village* is not one for the weak or the timid. We are engaged in a life-or-death struggle that will require people who have the spirit of the three hundred men of Gideon—people who will go down to the water and not take their eyes off the battle.

Pamphleteer of the American Revolution Tom Paine remarked, "When we are planning for posterity, we ought to remember that virtue is not hereditary." The government has not yet invented a program, a piece of legislation, or a department

that can give hope to disconnected urban youths, that can help a husband love his wife, that can teach a child honesty and integrity. That is because such a program does not exist. The only place where such an effort can happen is in our homes, and in our communities, and in our churches. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan knew this when he said two centuries after Paine: "Government cannot provide values to persons who have none or who have lost those they had. It cannot provide inner peace. It can provide outlets for moral energies, but it cannot create those energies."

Cultural Renewal

Real change must still come from the transformed hearts and souls of individuals. There is a great danger that you and I will once again be lulled into thinking that we will do our part by voting for the right people and promoting conservative public policies. We will feel that we can now sit back and watch these people write new laws, correct faulty policies, and get our country back on track.

Our charge is actually the opposite. If there is one thing that the elections of 1992 and 1994 have made abundantly clear, it is that now is the time for people of character to become agents for cultural change. For thirty years, we have been told by government that we should just send them our money and get out of the way. In 1994 we said, "Quit taking our money, and get out of our way!" Now, we must follow through.

President John F. Kennedy's famous challenge to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country" should be the motto for the GOP's Contract with America. While the Contract does indeed tell us what the priorities will be for the new majority party in Congress, the real message of the 1994 elections is a recognition of the proper, and limited, role of government.

More than two hundred years ago, our Founding Fathers grappled with the idea of federalism

as they began what we call today the "American Experiment." While they recognized the necessity of local and even national government, they also desired to create in the New World a system of government that cherishes the individual rights bestowed by our Creator and ensures that government intrusion will be minimized.

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In the thirty years since President Kennedy uttered his challenge, Americans have not had to consider what they could do for their country outside of national defense and taxes. Instead, the federal government has told us over and over again what it could do for us. When it told us that it could replace the obligation of families and communities to individuals in need, we accepted this thing called “welfare.” When government told us that education should be administered by the federal government and that schools, rather than parents, should teach sexual education and other behavior modification instead of how to read and write and think, we accepted that. And when the government told us that unchecked spending was necessary and that it planned to increase the government’s share of every taxpayer’s income, we even accepted that.

Today, we know the full cost of ceding our responsibilities to the federal government. Despite the best intentions of those who created these policies, the government cannot be our parents, cannot teach our children about responsibility and character, cannot regulate individual behavior, and cannot create entrepreneurial opportunities. Education author Charles Sykes calls our government system “the nanny state,” but I think that “pappy state” is more apt since the government today is raising millions of children at debilitating cost to both the recipients and taxpayers alike because so many fathers neither want to be nor are encouraged to be responsible.

The cultural and political change we are discussing requires two very different yet complementary strategies. While our political leaders in Washington consider redefining the role of government, we must continue to be vigilant in our homes and communities. We must continue to support and work for candidates who share our values; we must voice our opinions on important issues; and we must vote. All these things are necessary and non-negotiable to transform our nation.

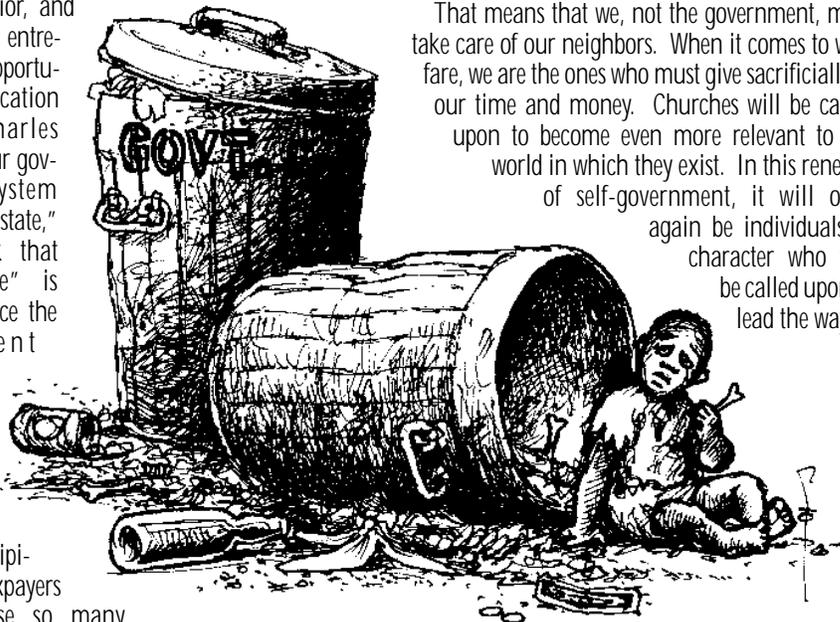
But these are merely actions in the political realm. It is equally important that we develop and

carry out a strategy for cultural change. Cultural change must be fought for and won in our homes, in our schools, on Main Street, even in our places of worship. The only reason to rebuild the *village* is to solidify those non-governmental institutions that support and offer resources to the family. True cultural change will inoculate us when political change threatens our values.

A Personal Contract with America

The challenge today is indeed to ask what we can do for our country, for our communities, and for our families. Instead of waiting for political change to occur in Washington and our state capitals, we must have a Personal Contract with America—one that renews our individual obligations in a just society. For only by embracing our core beliefs and working for change in each of our lives can we truly see cultural regeneration.

That means that we, not the government, must take care of our neighbors. When it comes to welfare, we are the ones who must give sacrificially of our time and money. Churches will be called upon to become even more relevant to the world in which they exist. In this renewal of self-government, it will once again be individuals of character who will be called upon to lead the way.



Our Personal Contract must be threefold. It must also be a corollary to our political contract. It must begin with our relationship with God, continue in our families, and extend to every institution in our community. In each area, we must take full responsibility and not surrender to the weakness of assigning blame to others.

1. Transforming our relationship with God: In order to bring about change in a sick culture, we must be a strong and fortified people—a people who

Hillsdale Presents the Adam Smith Award

Kevin Freeman, founder of the former Adam Smith Foundation, Jack Burns, Burns Brothers Inc., chairman, and George Roche, president of Hillsdale College, at the Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Educating for Virtue," in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.



The Award is a bronze statue of "The Sower," beautifully executed by Hillsdale College's resident sculptor and faculty member, Tony Frudakis. The figure is inspired by the biblical passage from the Book of Matthew: "A man sowed his seed. And as he sowed, some seed fell on good soil and produced a crop, some a hundredfold." Throughout our Western culture, the Parable of the Sower has symbolized man's industry and productivity and his ability to bring forth that which is the best within us.

*The Adam Smith Award is presented to individuals like Mr. Burns who defend the ideas, principles, and values that the 18th-century economist Adam Smith outlined so forcefully in *The Wealth of Nations*, which was published in 1776 and which became the intellectual justification for our nation's free economy.*



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