

IMPRIMIS

Because Ideas Have Consequences

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"The Lists Every American Should Make"

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George Roche has served as president of Hillsdale College since 1971. Formerly the presidentially appointed chairman of the National Council on Educational Research, the director of seminars at the Foundation for Economic Education, a professor of history at the Colorado School of Mines, and a U.S. Marine, he is the author of 12 books, including five Conservative Book Club selections. His latest book is *The Fall of the Ivory Tower: Government Funding, Corruption, and the Bankrupting of American Higher Education* (Regnery Publishing, 1994).



Reviews and/or excerpts of this volume have appeared in many sources, including *Forbes*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Reader's Digest*. It was also the subject of a cover story in a 1994 issue of *Insight* magazine. The editors named it the "Book of the Year," and *L.A. Times* syndicated columnist Cal Thomas has called it "the most important book on higher education since *The Closing of the American Mind*." ▲

In this issue of Imprimis, Hillsdale College President George Roche gives us a surprising, and valuable, piece of advice about how to approach America's most pressing problems and to set about solving them.

I am an inveterate list maker. I love making lists—of tools and gadgets to buy at the hardware store, of grocery staples that need restocking, of New Year's Resolutions, of the little yet vitally important details of living of which I often need to be reminded. Many of the notes I write to myself, especially those on my own shortcomings, begin with the words, "I must remember to...." When someone says, "Count your blessings," I take their advice literally, by making a written list.

Why We Are in So Much Trouble

So it is not surprising that when I recently was asked to reflect on our present culture and the general state of American society, my immediate response was to pick up a pen and reach for a pad of paper. At the top of the first page, I wrote the heading: "America in the 1990s: Why We Are in So Much Trouble." And here is the list I composed:

—*The loss of values* Values are the building blocks and mortar that keep our entire civilization together. They are our priorities; in other words, they are those things that we put at the top of every list that we make, no matter what the subject.

But we no longer seem to think that our values are worth defending. As I wrote several years ago in a book on higher education, “political correctness,” or “PC,” dominates the academy and the public square. This doctrine holds that all differences in ideas, values and lifestyles are equally valid, and that any attempt to prefer one over the other is an act of prejudice. Moreover, the differences between people—between blacks and whites, men and women, rich and poor, Westerners and non-Westerners—are more important than the qualities and values that they share in common. According to PC advocates, questions of race, gender, class, and power are the only real issues that govern human events.

If you think this kind of thinking is confined to our college campuses and our intellectual elites, just consider the L.A. riots, the O.J. Simpson trial, or any number of recent events that demonstrate how values have been destroyed by political correctness. Philosopher Jacques Barzun had it right when he said that political correctness does not legislate tolerance; it only organizes hatred.

—*The loss of truth* PC advocates also tell us that truth really isn’t objective at all; it depends on our point of view. One person’s truth is supposed to be just as good (or, more to the point, just as unreliable) as another’s. What has been passed off as “truth” are merely the collective prejudices of the dominant ruling class and culture. We must be shown how to “deconstruct” what we think is true.

The only truth that political correctness *will* admit is that everything—every poem, every book, every historical event or person, every emotion, attitude, or belief, every action—must be viewed in a political context as an instrument of exclusion, oppression, or liberation.

—*The loss of moral literacy* Honor and virtue are increasingly rare commodities. Cheating and lying have become acceptable, especially in school, because our children believe that, with few excep-

tions, “everybody’s doing it.” Sadly, they may be right. In a 1995 article for *Reader’s Digest*, Daniel R. Levine notes that *Who’s Who Among American High School Students* polled more than three thousand high school juniors and seniors who were at the top of their class. Seventy-eight percent admitted cheating and 89 percent admitted cheating was common at their schools.

In Kansas, Levine adds, another survey of the same number of college students led to almost identical results. Emporia State University psychology professor Stephen F. Davis found that 76 percent had cheated. He commented, “The numbers alone are disturbing, but even more alarming is the attitude. There’s no remorse. For students, cheating is a way of life.”

We are not only doing a poor job of teaching the three Rs, but we are

failing to teach our children the difference between right and wrong. Observers have characterized this problem as “a hole in the moral ozone,” or “moral poverty,” or “moral illiteracy.”

—*The loss of trust* We live in what may be the most cynical age in history—and the most gullible. For a long time, I thought that I was the only person who noticed this amazing contradiction, but in the last several years I have encountered a few writers who have pointed to it. We Americans are skeptical about many of the things we should believe, while we blindly accept many of the things we should question. On the one hand, we distrust politicians, journalists, and television and filmmakers because we know that they often have lied to us and deceived us, but, on the other hand, we still look to them as primary sources of information and as interpreters of reality.

According to social scientist Francis Fukuyama, the author of *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, we also seem to trust our fellow citizens less and less. This “decline of sociability” dramatically weakens our communities, our economy, and our civil society, which all depend on the “social capital” that is created by shared good will, ethical norms, and expectations.

“The fact is that we are no longer independent because we have lost confidence—confidence in ourselves. We have grown accustomed to thinking that there are some problems that are just so big and complex that only something else that is big and complex—like government—can tackle them.”

He warns that if we do not revive our trust in others, we will end up cooperating only under a system of coercion and regulation.

—*The loss of empathy* A related problem is the loss of empathy. I am not talking about what President Clinton meant when he recently said to the nation, “I feel your pain.” By empathy, I am referring to the ability to transcend our own immediate concerns to understand other human beings—to see the world from their perspectives without surrendering our own. Former National Endowment for the Humanities Chairman Lynne V. Cheney tells of an incident that occurred in 1994 that provides “a chilling vision of life” without empathy:

“That summer Mohammed Jaberipour, 49, was working a route in south Philadelphia in a Mister Softee ice cream truck when a 16-year-old tried to extort money. Jaberipour refused, and the youth shot him. As the father of three lay dying, neighborhood teenagers laughed and mocked his agony in a rap song they composed on the spot: ‘They killed Mr. Softee.’

‘It wasn’t human,’ another ice cream truck driver, a friend of Jaberipour who came on the scene shortly after the shooting, told the Philadelphia *Daily News*. ‘People were laughing and asking me for ice cream. I was crying....They were acting as though a cat had died, not a human being.’”

Mrs. Cheney quotes the conclusion of newspaper columnist Bob Greene: “We have increasingly become a nation of citizens who watch anything and everything as if it is all a show.” She adds, “But however it has come about, people who laugh at a dying man have no sense that a stranger can suffer as they do.”

—*The loss of independence and confidence* I don’t know the statistics, but I am willing to bet that there are now more laws and regulations on the books than there are people living in the United States. The state dictates how we should educate our children, earn our living, guard our health, take care of our communities, and even worship our God. Although there has been a tremendous resurgence of conservatism in this country, too many of us still look to Washington, D.C. to provide a vast array of services that would be better left to the private sector and to assume responsibilities that we once proudly bore.

The fact is that we are no longer independent because we have lost confidence—confidence in ourselves. We have grown accustomed to thinking that there are some problems that are just so big and complex that only something else that is big and complex—like government—can tackle them.

—*The loss of family* The good news is that the vital role of the traditional family is at long last the subject of national attention. The breakdown of the family, rather than poverty, or race, or any other factor once cited by the liberal establishment, is now widely recognized as the real root cause of rising rates of substance abuse, teen suicide, abortion, academic failure, welfare dependency, and violent crime.

But the bad news is that this time bomb isn’t ticking—it has already exploded, and we are experiencing the fallout. Here are just two of the casualty reports:

(1) Nearly one-third of all children are now born to single mothers. If this trend continues, in twenty years nearly half of all children born in our nation will be illegitimate.

(2) The national crime rate has tripled in the space of thirty years, and observers like Princeton University Professor John J. Dilulio, Jr., warn that we are breeding a whole new group of “superpredators”—youths who commit violent acts with absolutely no sense of remorse or respect for human life who, according to one prosecutor, “kill or maim on impulse, without any intelligible motive.”

It’s no wonder that for the first time in decades, almost all the experts on the right and the left in psychology, sociology, social work, and law enforcement agree: Our children need capable, responsible parents who have made a lifelong commitment to each other within the specific institution of marriage. This is because children need stability and consistency in their lives. They need the thousands of little moral and practical lessons that are taught in the context of daily family life. And, above all, they need the love that only a mother and father can give.

—*The loss of faith* Although millions of us still attend church and profess to believe in a Creator, we hold ourselves aloof from God. He is not, as He

should be, the most important, guiding force in our daily lives. In one way, this is more shocking than if we had become atheists. Atheists deny God and His authority. We accept Him, but we refuse to take Him seriously. At school, at work, at social gatherings, and in public, we are too afraid, reluctant, or embarrassed—to even mention His name.

And we are constantly searching for substitutes just as dieters crave fat-free cookies and ice cream. We want the taste of faith, but not the substance, and we expect to find it in the trendy new Life Experience Enrichment movement that peddles its secrets at New Age retreats, on motivational cassettes, and in glitzy paperbacks and infomercials.

In terms of sheer numbers, the Judeo-Christian community is still the largest group of any kind in America, but we have embraced a mainly post-Judeo-Christian culture in which traditional forms of any religion are relegated to the “back of the bus.”

The 19th-century Englishman Matthew Arnold used an even more haunting analogy in his famous poem, “Dover Beach,” to presage this loss:

The Sea of Faith

*Was once, too, at the full, and round
earth's shore*

*Lay like the folds of a bright girdle
furled.*

But now I only hear

*Its melancholy, long, withdrawing
roar,*

Retreating, to the breath

*Of the night wind, down the vast edges
drear*

And naked shingles of the world.

Yet Cheerfulness Will Keep Breaking In

If this list that I have composed were the only one that described America in the 1990s, we would be better off to eschew civilization and retreat to caves. But as the historian and man of letters Russell Kirk (1918-1994) reminds us,

“ We are not only doing a poor job of teaching the three Rs, but we are failing to teach our children the difference between right and wrong.”

“We live in a world that is giving at the seams. Sometimes, indeed—especially to a man who travels a good deal—there comes an uneasy feeling that the garment of civilization has already parted and that if one were to tug even the least bit, a sleeve or a trouser leg of our social fabric would come away in his

hand. In half the world, the decent draperies of the old order have been burnt altogether, and King Demos struts naked, like the emperor with his imaginary new clothes. When the garment of civilization is worn out, we are confronted by the ugly spectacle of naked power.

“Yet cheerfulness will keep breaking in....”

Yet cheerfulness will keep breaking in. What a wonderful and wise sentiment! We would all do well to remember it; in fact, it would make a great title for another list—a list of what is right in America. Despite our troubles, we have many reasons to expect a bright future. There are literally millions of us who, for the most part, do defend our values, who do tell the truth, who do live honorably and virtuously, who do live up to high moral standards, who do exhibit trust, independence, and empathy, who do build strong families, and who are courageous witnesses to faith.

For over two hundred years, we have found ways of overcoming adversity and succeeding against all odds. Though they may sometimes be threatened, our best qualities—optimism, resilience, moral imagination, ingenuity, charity, compassion, and spiritual strength—have a way of resurfacing when we need them most.

The Greatest Lists of All

How can we help our best qualities resurface now, at this moment in time? We can begin by learning from some of the greatest lists of all.

IN CONGRESS

ASSEMBLED



When in the Course of human Events, it becomes necessary for one People to dissolve the political Bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the Earth, the separate and equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind requires that the Reasons which impel them to the Separation should be explained to those to whom they are addressed. That among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient Causes; and that Reformations in them should be the Result of a long Sufferance, but when a long Train of Abuses and Usurpations, which have assumed the Character of absolute Despotism, it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security. — Such has been the Patient Sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the Necessity which constrains them to alter their former System of Government. The History of the present King of Great Britain is a History of repeated Injuries and Usurpations, all having in direct and plain Purpose to bring these Colonies under the absolute Despotism of Great Britain. —

The Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution

In 1776, a young delegate to the Continental Congress named Thomas Jefferson retired to the upstairs bedroom of a bricklayer's home in Philadelphia. He labored for eight days to produce the Declaration of Independence. This document is essentially a list of indictments against King George III and the British government. Think of the language:

—He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary....

—He has dissolved Representative Houses....

—He has obstructed the Administration of Justice....

—He has erected a multitude of New Offices and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people and eat out their substance....

—He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws....

Why was such a list of complaints important? The American colonists knew full well that the world would condemn them for breaking away from their mother country unless they could prove that they were not rebelling—they were fighting to preserve their rights. They knew that what they were doing was not only unprecedented but was a huge gamble, so they were determined to let everyone know the reasons for their course of action.

The Declaration of Independence also provided a more positive list of reasons for the creation of the United States. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," Jefferson wrote:

—that all men are created equal,

—that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,

—that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,

—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government....

A decade after the American colonists fought and won the Revolutionary War, a small group of the founding fathers met in Philadelphia to lay out the ground rules for governing the new nation. They decided upon a written constitution—the first of its kind in the history of the world, dedicated to the principle of individual liberty. They also decided that it would be best presented in the form of a list—with seven articles and twenty-four subsections. Later, ten amendments known as the "Bill of Rights" were added.

They are short—much less than the length of a single chapter in an average novel, but the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights are still the best and soundest basis for our entire political system.

The Ten Commandments

I know it sounds awfully corny, but it is true: God likes to make lists, too. Look, for example, at the

Ten Commandments recorded in the Book of Exodus. I believe that God gave us these com-

mandments in the form of a single list so that there would be no question about what He wants us to do or how He wants us to live. Like an ideal list, it is short, simple, and to the point—we can easily memorize it, we can easily understand it, and we know exactly what we must do to fulfill its terms:

—Thou shalt have no other Gods before me.

—Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image....

—Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.

—Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy....

—Honor thy father and mother....

—Thou shalt not kill.

—Thou shalt not commit adultery.

—Thou shalt not steal.

—Thou shalt not bear false witness....

—Thou shalt not covet....

The Pope's Message to the United Nations

A more contemporary list is contained in the final paragraph of John Paul II's October 1995 speech to the United Nations. The Pope addressed a series of propositions to all men and women, of all faiths, in all the nations of the world. As we prepare to leave one century and enter into another, his list offers a compelling vision of the past and the future:

—It is no accident that we are here.

—Each and every human person has been created in the "image and likeness" of the One who is the origin of all that is.

"Why do we make lists? We make lists so we will not forget what is important. But all too often we regard list-making as a trivial task when it should be our first and most important priority. For if we chronically forget items like milk and bread unless we make a grocery list, or nuts and bolts unless we make a hardware store list, isn't it also likely that we will forget items like virtue and compassion unless we make a character list, or freedom and self-reliance unless we make a citizenship list?"



For the past four years, *Money* magazine has included Hillsdale College on its list of the top 100 "best buys" among all colleges and universities. The *New York Times* and *Barron's* have also regularly listed Hillsdale as a "best buy." In 1994, *U.S. News and World Report* ranked Hillsdale second in the Midwest among small colleges. The Templeton Foundation Honor Rolls for Free Enterprise Teaching have twice named Hillsdale as number one in the nation. And Hillsdale has been featured in many publications like *Reader's Digest*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Forbes*, *Insight*, and *The College Board Review* as one of the most outstanding success stories in American higher education.



IMPRIMIS (im-pri-mis), taking its name from the Latin term, "in the first place," is the publication of Hillsdale College. Executive Editor, Ronald L. Trowbridge; Managing Editor, Lissa Roche; Assistant, Patricia A. DuBois. Illustrations by Tom Curtis. The opinions expressed in IMPRIMIS may be, but are not necessarily, the views of Hillsdale College and its External Programs division. Copyright © 1996. Permission to reprint in whole or part is hereby granted, provided a version of the following credit line is used: "Reprinted by permission from IMPRIMIS, the monthly journal of Hillsdale College." Subscription free upon request. ISSN 0277-8432. Circulation 640,000 worldwide, established 1972. IMPRIMIS trademark registered in U.S. Patent and Trade Office #1563325.

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