

IMPRIMIS

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Because Ideas Have Consequences

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Virtue and the Free Society

Jeb Bush

Chairman, Foundation for Florida's Future



Jeb Bush's career began in the 1970s in the banking industry, and in the 1980s, he entered the real estate business, helping to build the Codina-Bush Group (which he serves as president and chief operating officer) into the largest full service commercial real estate company in South Florida. He has also served as Florida's secretary of commerce, chairman of the Dade County Republican Party, and as a board member of the Dade County Homeless Trust.

Currently, Mr. Bush is a board member of the Heritage Foundation, president of the George Bush Presidential Library Foundation, a partner in the National Football League's Jacksonville Jaguars franchise, and chairman of the Foundation for Florida's Future. ▲

Business executive Jeb Bush describes the moral cancer eating away at America and suggests that instead of some new "miracle cure," we need some simple, old-fashioned remedies that we can all apply to heal our nation. His remarks were delivered at Hillsdale's October 1996 Shavano Institute Seminar, "Educating for Virtue: The New Values Revolution," in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Broadcaster Paul Harvey told a version of the following story on the radio many years ago.

There was an old man who was a great admirer of democracy and public education. So close to his heart did he hold both institutions that he tried to bring them together into one grand experiment, a public college where students would practice self-governance. There would be no regulations; the goodwill and judgment of the students would suffice. After years of planning, the school was finally opened. The old man was overjoyed.

But as the months went by, students proved time and time again that they were not the models of discipline and discernment the old man envisioned. They skipped classes, drank to excess, and wasted hours in frivolous pursuits. One night, 14 students, disguised by masks and "animated with wine," went on a rampage that ended in a brawl. One struck a professor with a brick, and another used a cane on his victim.

In response, the college's trustees convened a special meeting. The old man, now 82 years old

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and very frail, was asked to address the student body. In his remarks, he recalled the lofty principles upon which the college had been founded. He said he had expected more—much more—from the students. He even confessed that this was the most painful event of his life. Suddenly, he stopped speaking. Tears welled up in his failing eyes. He was so overcome with grief that he sat down, unable to go on.

His audience was so touched that at the conclusion of the meeting the 14 offenders stepped forward to admit their guilt. But they could not undo the damage already done. A strict code of conduct and numerous onerous regulations were instituted at the college. The old man's experiment had failed. Why? Because he took for granted the one essential ingredient necessary for success: *virtue*. Only a virtuous people can secure and maintain their freedom.

A short time later, on the Fourth of July, the old man passed away. Engraved on his tombstone were the simple words that reflected the success and failure of his most important experiments: "Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and father of the University of Virginia." Now, as Mr. Harvey says, you know the rest of the story.

Jefferson's setback at the University of Virginia in the 1820s reflects today's threat to our own larger experiment in self-governance—a national experiment in which success or failure will ultimately be determined by our virtue. Virtue is indeed the oxygen of a free society. As it fills our lungs, we become a people of strength, capable of vigorously exercising the kind of self-governance that our founding fathers expected of us. Without virtue, however, there can be no self-governance. We become strangled and weak, incapable of handling our own day-to-day affairs. And this is an open invitation for big government to curtail our freedoms.

Without virtue, we turn to nationalized health care, V-chips for every television set, metal detectors in all public schools, volunteers paid by the government to volunteer. Without virtue, we embrace a "Little Things presidency," featuring a chief executive who acts more like a city manager or a nanny

instead of the leader of a free people. Without virtue, we are buried alive under mountains of tedious rules, mandates, and regulations at all levels of government. Yet many of us have little or no appreciation of the vital role virtue plays in our lives. We don't understand, for example, how the lack of virtue leads to social problems like out-of-wedlock births, crime, welfare dependency, and drug abuse.

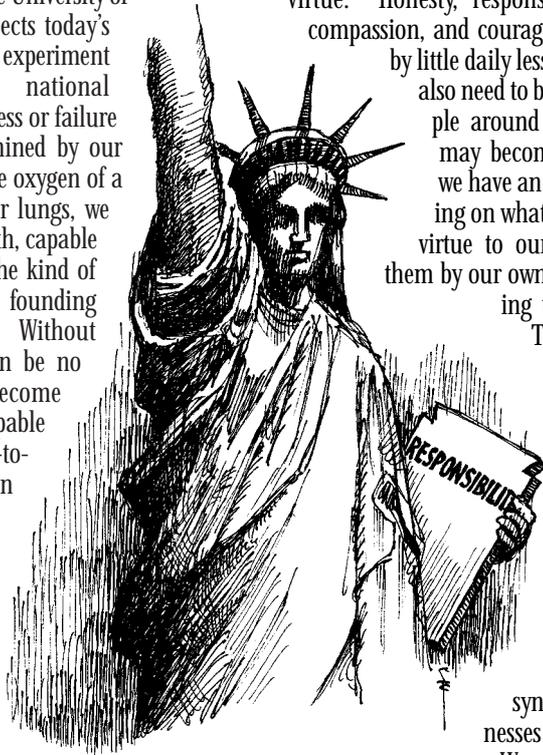
We don't even appreciate the direct connection between virtue and good citizenship anymore. A recent survey conducted by the Boy Scouts of America asked adult males from all over the United States, "What makes a good citizen?" Unbelievably, 26 percent responded that it means "keeping physically fit," while only 12 percent said it means "participating in youth-related organizations" or "volunteering time in the community."

Learning and Teaching Virtue

How do we restore virtue as a national priority? First, we must make it an individual priority. That means realizing that we are not genetically endowed with virtue. Honesty, responsibility, self-discipline, compassion, and courage need to be cultivated by little daily lessons in character. They also need to be reinforced by the people around us in order that they may become habits. As parents, we have an even tougher job: passing on what we have learned about virtue to our children. We teach them by our own example and by sharing the example of others.

That means surrounding them with good role models and getting them actively involved in voluntary associations that not only practice practical forms of virtue but bind communities and citizens together, from churches and synagogues to local businesses and charities.

We also have to make sure that our schools are reinforcing what we have taught our children. Not counting pre-school or kindergarten, our children are in school eight hours a day, five days a week for 12 years. By the



time they graduate from high school they have spent more of their waking hours with teachers than with us. Do we take it on faith that we have taught our sons and daughters the lessons of virtue so well that they are immunized from all the peer pressure, incivility, and vice around them in school? Can we be confident that they will always identify each and every act they see as “right” or “wrong”?

The trouble is, however, that the modern public school establishment has decided that virtue and absolute standards of “right” and “wrong” aren’t its business. It has forced teachers to abandon the kind of old-fashioned moral instruction that once served so well. Parents, teachers, and students who complain are treated as troublemakers.

But the good news is that there is a nationwide movement to restore genuine character education (not such impostors as “values clarification,” “self-esteem development,” and “sensitivity training”) in the public schools. I would like to tell you a little about one example of this movement that comes from my own personal experience.

About two years ago, an organization I chair called the Foundation for Florida’s Future proposed the creation of charter schools within the public school system that would not only set high standards of academic excellence but would link such standards with teaching virtue. Our proposal was accepted on a trial basis, and I am proud to report that the Liberty City Charter School (LCCS) is now operating in one of the most challenging inner-city neighborhoods in Miami. The school is jointly operated by the Foundation and the Urban League of Greater Miami. The contract these two groups signed with the Dade County school board stipulates that LCCS’s 60 students must advance at least one grade level in reading, math, and science each year. (It may sound pretty modest, but it is only a minimum requirement. Besides, how many schools do you know that offer this kind of warranty with their diplomas?)

In exchange for meeting all the provisions of the contract, the board has suspended some of the burdensome regulations placed on other public

schools. Teachers and administrators also have the freedom to design their own curriculum and set policies that best suit the school. After

a prolonged debate between the Foundation and the Dade County school board, LCCS has also replaced the “human growth and development” classes taught in other Florida public schools with its own alternative classes in character education. (In case you aren’t up on this latest politically correct trend in public education, “Human growth and development” classes teach sex education not only to

older children but to kindergartners and first graders, who perform a variety of exercises to identify their “private parts.”)

LCCS uses family involvement as the cornerstone of its character program. The families (many of which are headed by single parents, grandparents, and guardians) are excited and heartened by this approach. They do not mind the 30 hours a year that they are required to spend at the school. Nor do they mind attending school events or helping students with homework on a regular basis.

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Creating a Climate of Achievement

Just as education has a meaningful role to play in enhancing virtue, so too does the reverse hold true: Virtue has a meaningful role in enhancing education. One of the principles in which the Liberty City Charter School firmly believes is “supply-side ethics.” A student who excels in virtue will also excel in academics. Strong character actually makes it easier for children to learn.

In fact, supply-side ethics explain the extraordinary success of hundreds of private and parochial schools, as well as the geometric growth of the home schooling movement. Greater academic achievement is credited to a greater appreciation of responsibility, hard work, self-discipline, and integrity. Students also gain a better sense of the intrinsic value of education.

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The public school establishment may not agree, but many public school teachers do. Fifty-three percent of all public school teachers in Cleveland send their children to private schools. The same goes for 49 percent in Boston and 39 percent in Los Angeles. Do they do this because they make so much money that they don't mind paying twice for their children's education through taxes and tuition? Of course not! They do it because they know that virtue is an absolute necessity for a safe and productive learning environment. They have seen what has happened to the public school system as teachers have been gradually stripped of their moral authority, including the authority to discipline students and the authority to teach certain moral absolutes. They don't want their children to be trapped in that system.

This is the same system in which public school student test scores have plummeted, the academic year has been cut by 37 days, hall monitors have been replaced by hall security guards, and colleges must now teach what high schools should have taught in the first place. To cite the case of Florida again, more than 42 percent of the state's students who enter college require remedial education. They have not learned the 3 Rs, despite having passed a standard competency test in order to receive their high school diplomas. Here is one sample question to give you an idea of the general level of difficulty of this test:

Sara needs to change the oil in her car. Where would she look to find out which stores are having a sale on motor oil: (a) an automotive directory; (b) a local newspaper; (c) a road atlas; or (d) a telephone directory?

In 1995, nearly 20 percent of the Florida junior and seniors who took the competency test failed. Another 10 percent dropped out before they could even be tested.

Lawrence Wright is one Florida student who demonstrates that character has *everything* to do with academic achievement. Lawrence grew up in a poor section of Miami. He was an undisciplined teenager who managed to fail most of his classes. But in high school he started playing football. His coach drove home the importance of discipline and responsibility. His guidance counselor and teachers taught him that virtue must be practiced in school as well as in sports. Soon, Lawrence even began to see the classroom as an extension of the playing field. He wanted to compete there and win.

Although he studied constantly, Lawrence knew he had an uphill battle to overcome years of underachievement. He took the SAT test four times before finally earning a score that would make him eligible to go on to college. For three years

now, he has earned a spot on the All-Academic Team in the Southeastern Conference with a B+ grade point average. This is no small feat when you consider that Lawrence Wright is the defensive captain of the number-one ranked University of Florida football team.

Our Cowardly Legs

There is another story that comes to mind when thinking about examples of virtue. Abraham Lincoln used to tell about an old soldier who was always boasting of his bravery until the day his company actually saw battle and he retreated without orders. When he was forced to explain his conduct to his commanding officer, he said, "I have as brave a *heart* as Julius Caesar ever had, but, somehow or other, whenever danger approaches, my cowardly *legs* run away with it."

There can be no doubt that Americans possess brave, caring hearts. But when it comes time for us to act virtuous and to insist that others do the same, we find our cowardly legs running away with our brave, caring hearts.

So we end up looking at the ills of society and making blanket accusations like "big business creates social injustice" or "the rich get rich off the backs of the poor" or "Hollywood causes all the violence and cruelty in the world." By blaming others, we fail to find the real solutions to our problems and we do not carry out our own responsibilities. Sometimes we attend charity dinners and donate money to worthy causes, but when we look in the mirror each morning can we honestly say that we are shining examples of virtue? Do we make the effort to spend more time with our children who so desperately need to learn from our examples? Do we take to the streets to spread virtue in our own neighborhoods and communities?

Early in the 20th century, playwright and social critic George Bernard Shaw wrote, "Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it." As the 21st century and the next millennium loom before us, it falls upon us as Americans—the heirs to the greatest experiment in self-governance ever known—to prove that we do not dread responsibility, that freedom is not an ebbing tide, and that virtue is the wellspring of all that is good in us and our nation. ▲

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