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Does Honor Have a Future?

William J. Bennett
Co-founder, Empower America

William J. Bennett holds a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Texas and a law degree from Harvard. In 1981, he was named chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and in 1985, he was elevated to President Reagan's cabinet as secretary of the Department of Education. In 1989, President Bush named him director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy.



Dr. Bennett is currently the John M. Olin Distinguished Fellow in Cultural Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation and co-founder of Empower America.

He has written or edited numerous best-selling books, including *The Death of Outrage: Bill Clinton and the Assault on American Ideals* and *The Moral Compass: Stories for a Life's Journey*. His anthology, *The Book of Virtues*, is one of the most popular publications ever, with more than two million copies in print. ♣

Is America becoming "ethically challenged"? Scandal after scandal has rocked, but not, it seems, shocked the nation. Former Education Secretary William J. Bennett says that it is high time to restore the ancient and vital concept of honor in private and public life.

Dr. Bennett spoke at the February 1998 Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Heroes for a New Century and a New Generation," in Scottsdale, Arizona.

The modern age brings to mind Christian apologist C. S. Lewis's chilling words in *The Abolition of Man*: "We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst."

America is the greatest nation in the history of the world—the richest, most powerful, most envied, most consequential. And yet America is the same nation that leads the industrialized world in rates of murder, violent crime, imprisonment, divorce, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, single-parent households, teen suicide, cocaine consumption, and pornography production and consumption.

America is a place of heroes, honor, achievement, and respect. But it is also a place where heroism is often confused with celebrity, honor with fame, true achievement with popularity, individual respect with political correctness. Our culture celebrates self-gratification, the crossing of all moral

Dr. Bennett's remarks are based on his book, The Death of Outrage: Bill Clinton and the Assault on American Ideals (1998), and his 1997 U.S. Naval Academy address, "Does Honor Have a Future?"

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boundaries, and now even the breaking of all social taboos. And on top of it all, too often the sound heard is whining—the whining of America—which can be heard only as the enormous ingratitude of we modern men toward our unprecedented good fortune.

Despite our wonders and greatness, we are a nation that has experienced so much social regression, so much decadence, in so short a period of time, that we have become the kind of place to which civilized countries used to send missionaries.

Casting Stones

Social regression and decadence are glaringly obvious in the current presidential administration. Now, whenever I make a comment these days criticizing Bill Clinton, someone inevitably asks, “Aren’t you casting stones?” It shows how far we have fallen that calling upon the President of the United States to account for charges of adultery, lying to the public, perjury, and obstruction of justice is regarded as akin to stoning.

It is also an example of what sociologist Alan Wolfe refers to as America’s new 11th Commandment: “Thou shalt not judge.” In *One Nation After All*, Wolfe writes, “Middle-class Americans are reluctant to pass judgment

on how other people act and think.” Of course, all of us are in favor of tolerance and forgiveness. But the moral pendulum has swung too far in the direction of relativism. If a nation of free people can no longer make pronouncements on fundamental matters of right and wrong—for example, that a married 50-year-old commander-in-chief ought not to have sexual relations with a young intern in his office and then lie about it—it has lost its way.

The problem is not with those who are withholding judgment until all the facts are in, but with the increasing number of people who want to avoid judgment altogether. Firm moral convictions have been eroded by tentativeness, uncertainty, diffidence. The new relativist consensus Wolfe describes is not surprising. During the last 30 years we have witnessed a relentless assault on traditional norms and a profound shift in public attitudes. The tectonic plates have moved.

Why have we been drawn toward such permissiveness? My former philosophy professor John Silber was correct when he spoke of an “invitation to mutual corruption.” We are hesitant to impose upon ourselves a common moral code because we want our own exemptions. This modern allergy to

judgments and standards, of which attitudes toward the Clinton scandals are but a manifestation, is deeply problematic, for a defining mark of a good republic is precisely the willingness to make judgments about things that matter.

In America, we do not defer to kings, cardinals, or aristocrats; we rely instead on the people’s capacity to make reasonable judgments based on moral principles. Our form of government requires of us not moral perfection but modest virtues and adherence to some standards.

Those who constantly invoke the sentiment of “Who are we to judge?” should consider the anarchy that would ensue if we adhered to this sentiment in, say, our courtrooms. What would happen if those sitting on a jury decided to be “nonjudgmental” about rapists and sexual harassers, embezzlers and tax cheats? Justice would be lost. Without being “judgmental,” Americans would never have put an end to slavery, outlawed child labor, emancipated women, or ushered in the civil rights movement. Nor would we have prevailed against Nazism and communism, or known how to explain our opposition.

Mr. Clinton himself admitted in a judgment-laden 1996 proclamation he signed during National Character Week: “[I]ndividual character involves honoring and embracing certain core ethical values: honesty, respect,

responsibility. . . . Parents must teach their children from the earliest age the difference between right and wrong. But we must all do our part.”

How do we judge a wrong—any wrong whatsoever—when we have gutted the principle of judgment itself? What arguments can be made after we have strip-mined all the arguments of their force, their power, and their ability to inspire public outrage? We all know that there are times when we will have to judge others, when it is both right and *necessary* to judge others. If we do not confront the soft relativism that is currently disguised as a virtue, we will find ourselves morally and intellectually disarmed.

Corruption

In living memory, the chief threats to American democracy have come from without: first Nazism and Japanese imperialism, and later, Soviet communism. But these wars, hot and cold, ended in spectacular American victories. The threats we now face are from within. They are far different, more difficult to detect, more insidious: decadence, cynicism, and boredom.

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Writing about corruption in democratic government, Alexis de Tocqueville warned about “not so much the immorality of the great as the fact that immorality may lead to greatness.” When private citizens impute a ruler’s success “mainly to some of his vices . . . an odious connection is thus formed between the ideas of turpitude and power, unworthiness and success, utility and dishonor.” The rulers of democratic nations, Tocqueville said, “lend the authority of the government to the base practices of which they are accused. They afford dangerous examples, which discourage the struggles of virtuous independence.”

Tocqueville recognized, too, that democratic citizens would not be conscious of this tendency, and in fact would probably disagree that it even existed. This is what makes it all the more dangerous; the corrupt actions of democratic leaders influence the public in subtle ways that often go unnoticed among citizens. This sort of decay is gradual and hard to perceive over a short period of time.

Which brings us back to Bill Clinton. If there is no consequence to the president’s repeated betrayal of public trust and his abuses of power, it will have a profound impact on our political and civic life. Bill Clinton and his defenders are defining personal morality down, radically lowering the standards of what we expect from our president, and changing for the worse the way politics is and will be practiced. Recall the words of John Dean: “If Watergate had succeeded, what would have been put into the system for years to come? People thinking the way Richard Nixon thought and thinking that is the way it should be. It would have been a travesty; it would have been frightening.”

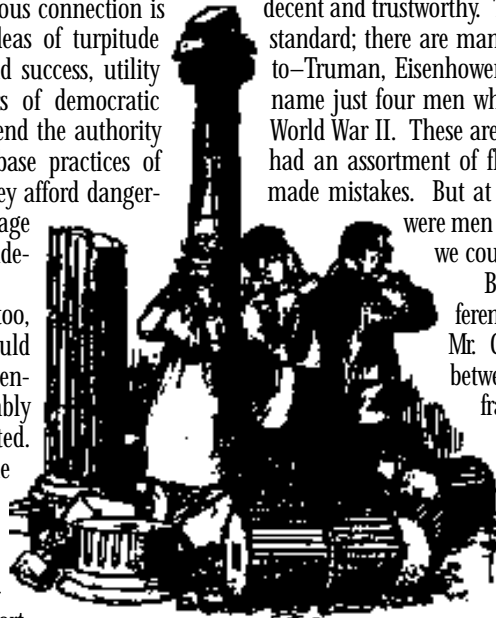
We find ourselves at this familiar juncture today. It would be a travesty, and frightening, to legitimize Mr. Clinton’s ethics and arguments made on their behalf. But we are getting close, disconcertingly close, to doing just that. “He’s strictly one of a kind,” *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory wrote, “our first president to be strengthened by charges of immorality.”

You will often hear Clinton apologists argue that to take a stand against the president’s misconduct will send the signal that anyone who is not a saint need not apply for the job. Nonsense. We do not expect our presidents to be men of extraordinary virtue, who have lived lives of near perfection. We should not even expect all our presidents to have the sterling character of, say, a Washington or

a Lincoln, although we should hope for it, and certainly honor it on those rare occasions when we find it.

We have every right, however, to expect individuals who, taken in the totality of their acts, are decent and trustworthy. This is not an impossible standard; there are many examples we can look to—Truman, Eisenhower, Carter, and Reagan, to name just four men who served six terms since World War II. These are men, like all of us, who had an assortment of flaws and failings. They made mistakes. But at the end of the day, they were men whose character, at least, we could count on.

Bill Clinton’s is not. The difference between these men and Mr. Clinton is the difference between common human frailty and corruption. That we accept the latter as common is a measure of how low our standards have dropped. We have to aim higher, and expect more—from our presidents and ourselves.



The Value-Free Culture

Our most exalted leader, a man who once proudly boasted that he would head the most ethical administration in history, is now saying to the American people, in effect, “My political enemies are to blame for all the scandals that surround me. I have nothing more to say. The rules don’t apply to me. There are no consequences to my actions. It’s irrelevant. My private life has nothing to do with my public life. My only responsibility is to do the people’s business.”

This is moral bankruptcy, and it is damaging our country, our standards, and our self-respect. It is also jeopardizing the future of the next generation of American leaders. A year ago, I delivered an address at the U.S. Naval Academy in which I told the Annapolis cadets that I was well aware of the fact that even among their ranks—among the military’s brightest and best young men and women—there is widespread confusion of purpose and attenuation of belief. After all, if the character and personal conduct of the acknowledged leader of the free world is “irrelevant,” then what is relevant? Why should anyone feel compelled to make sacrifices for the sake of an abstract principle like honor?

Young people just don’t seem to be finding the

answers to these troubling questions in the value-free culture of the 1990s. Please allow me to use two major historical events as reference points to describe this culture. In 1999, the famous New York rock festival, Woodstock, will celebrate its 30th anniversary. In its first 24 hours, Woodstock attracted 300,000 young people. It was characterized by rowdiness, drinking, drug use, promiscuity, and even death.

But back in the summer of '69, Woodstock was hailed uncritically as the "defining event of a generation." It was undoubtedly the high point of the counterculture movement in America. "If it feels good, do it" was the unofficial banner under which the participants paraded. It is worth noting, however, that most of those who attend Woodstock reunions today were not even at the original festival. Evidently, the memories are just not worth rekindling. The boys and girls have grown up—and grown beyond what Woodstock stood for. As adults, they consider it to have been childish, utopian, irrelevant, irresponsible, or worse.

But their children and grandchildren are receiving a very different impression from countless magazine articles, books, television specials, music videos, and movies that claim Woodstock was the greatest—the hippest—event ever and that the psychedelic pioneers should be envied for their brave and mocking defiance of everyone and everything that went before.

The year 1999 will also mark the 54th anniversary of Operation Overlord. This secret Normandy invasion under the command of Dwight D. Eisenhower was the largest amphibious landing in history. In its first 24 hours, it involved about 170,000 young people. What D-Day veterans, as well as their families and friends, continue to celebrate in huge numbers at *their* reunions is something far different than is celebrated at Woodstock.

Poignancy and dignity surround their gatherings, if only because the stakes during the dark days of World War II were so high, the heroism so manifest, the examples so inspiring. The participants can well recall President Roosevelt's moving radio broadcast on June 6, 1944, which called the nation to pray:

Almighty God: Our sons, Pride of our nation, this day have set on a mighty endeavor. . . . They will need thy blessings. Their road will be long and hard. For the enemy is strong. He may hurl back our forces. . . . They will be sorely tried, by

night and day. . . . The darkness will be rent by noise and flame. Men's souls will be shaken with the violence of war.

As at Woodstock, there were deaths. But they were different, in numbers and in cause. In one 10-minute period on Omaha Beach, a single rifle company of 205 men lost 197, including every officer and sergeant. These were not pointless or avoidable deaths. The price was very high—but that for which the soldiers died was sacred. We remember. Their comrades-in-arms remember. And so those who can, come back again and again to the battlefields to commemorate what has come to be called the "longest day."

What do today's youth learn about Operation Overlord from the present culture? With a few notable exceptions, like the recent film *Saving Private Ryan*, they learn that it was just an unfortunate episode in our history that happened a long time ago and that only interests "old-timers" like their grandparents and great-grandparents. Young people don't feel they need to know much about D-Day unless it is going to be covered on a test in school, and they certainly don't regard it as relevant to their own lives.

What Endures

In both cases, we can easily change young people's minds, but first we need to take on the much more difficult task of changing the present culture. Properly speaking, a value-laden culture should take heed of the fact that ephemeral things are the flies of summer. They drift away with the breeze of time. They are as wind and ashes. An event like Woodstock cannot hold the affections of the heart, or command respect, or win allegiance, or make men and women proud. It may be remembered by the media, but it leaves no lasting impression on the soul. It is forgotten. It is meant to be forgotten. Few people make pilgrimages to Woodstock, for it can give them nothing of worth.

Plato reminds us that what is real is what endures. That is why events like Operation Overlord will, in a value-laden culture, remain vivid and meaningful. War has always been the crucible—that is, the vessel as well as the severest test—for our core beliefs. The battles of Trenton, Midway, and Tarawa; those who served with John

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A New Home for the Hillsdale Academy

Scot Hicks
Headmaster, Hillsdale Academy



Scot Hicks holds degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth College, and Oxford's Wadham College. He has taught at Northfield Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts, St. Stephens School in Rome, St. Paul's School in New York, and CEFAM in Lyons. He has also served as the director of the American section of the Lycée International in Saint-Germain-en-Laye and as director of studies and senior school head at the Champion School in Athens. ▲

This October, a new multimillion-dollar facility for the Hillsdale Academy was dedicated. Established in 1990 by Hillsdale College, this K-10 (soon to be K-12) school has become a model for Americans seeking true educational reform. Nearly 1,500 copies of its innovative curriculum outline, the Hillsdale Academy Reference Guide, have been sold or distributed, and more than 200 private schools and scores of home school parents and home school networks use the Guide in the classroom. Here are Headmaster Scot Hicks' dedicatory remarks.

We are assembled here to dedicate a new home for the Hillsdale Academy. It is a very old custom, as old as the word "dedication" itself. The Latin *dedicatio* (the layman's version of *consecratio* or consecration) describes an ancient ritual whereby the owner of a profane object—a door post, a table, a house—removed that object from the secular sphere where anyone could use it for any purpose and placed it in a sacred sphere where only authorized

persons could use it for a specific purpose. A table or a block of marble, for instance, became an altar to be used only by the head of the household.

President Abraham Lincoln was faithful to this tradition when he presided over the dedication of a Gettysburg cemetery in 1863. Of course, he told the audience that "in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract." But then he reminded his countrymen that there *was* an important contribution they could make: They could dedicate themselves to the principles of freedom for which the Union soldiers at Gettysburg fought.

Today, we are here to dedicate ourselves to the same principles of freedom and to the vision that has made the Hillsdale Academy possible. What is that vision? Perhaps the best way to sum it up is to repeat the words of the song our students and teachers sing at the close of Morning Prayer:

'Tis a gift to be simple,
'Tis a gift to be free,
'Tis a gift to come down where we ought
to be . . .
[Where] to bow and bend we shan't be
ashamed,
[And] by turning, turning, we come
round right.

School is a simple business—if you stick to business. How well are we are sticking to business at the Hillsdale Academy? Here is what I see and hear on any given day. There is the excitement inspired by the kindergarteners' morning inspection of an anthill's tunnels, chambers, guard ants, and nurse ants. There is Mrs. Steiner, who interrupts a story about Christopher Columbus to gently remind one young listener about disturbing his neighbor. There is the intensity of a mid-afternoon spelling bee in Mrs. Sommerville's classroom, as expressed by knit brows and rocking cordovan loafers.

There is the gleeful laugh of Chris before he puts away another challenger at tetherball. There is the ninth graders' thoughtful discussion of Greek notions of justice after Mr. Knowlton collects their homework assignments on Edith Hamilton's classic account of the fall of the House of Atreus. There is the third graders' display of how to produce written work in time-tested stages: idea generation, outline, rough draft, editing, proofreading.

There is the exuberant fourth grader who is admonished to retrace his steps in order to demonstrate that it can be done without making a distur-

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Bishop Butler Addresses Academy Students

A former Detroit city councilman, Keith Butler and his wife Deborah began the Word of Faith International Christian Center in 1979. They have brought Christ's living word to a congregation that now numbers more than 14,000 in the Detroit area.



Their ministry has also expanded to churches in Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, and Arizona and reaches ever-increasing audiences through television and radio broadcasts. ♣

Why build this Academy? Why spend millions of dollars? Why devote all the time and effort? There are at least five reasons that come to mind and

that explain why this particular institution at this particular college is crucial, not just for the children who attend it, but for the entire United States.

First, we need more than anything else to provide more quality education that emphasizes the mastery of basic skills. Children must know how to read, spell, compute, and think. Sounds simple, doesn't it? But you would be surprised how many schools are failing to teach these skills and stubbornly refuse to admit it.

Second, we need to reaffirm certain basic values, especially since the current culture seems to



place little value upon them. These values should not be controversial—they are all about honesty, hard work, self-discipline, charity. They should be backed up by reasonable but firm disciplinary policies and strong adult authority. I believe there is no substitute for Judeo-Christian values in the classroom. These values do not constitute an assault on anyone's civil rights—history reveals that they are the source of the only true protection of civil rights. They tell us we are all equal in the sight of God; that we all have a responsibility to treat others as we want to be treated; and that we must all seek truth and justice.

Third, we need to make parents and teachers partners in rearing the next generation. What children learn at home and at school must be consistent. And they need mental, physical, and spiritual (that is, moral) instruction from all the interested adults in their lives. Remember: These children are the leaders who could turn our nation around in the 21st century.

Fourth, we need more alternatives to public school education to keep competition alive and to encourage reform. Parents need to have choices. They need schools they can trust to teach their children the right lessons.

Fifth, we need schools that will encourage patriotism. Tragically, there are literally hundreds of schools in this country that have abandoned not only school prayer but also the Pledge of Allegiance. These are usually the same institutions that teach their charges that America is a terrible place to live and that our national past is shameful. Well, I have been a student of history and I have traveled the world, and the reality is far different. For over two centuries, America has been and continues to be the greatest nation on earth. There is no other place that offers so much freedom or so much opportunity or that aspires to such lofty and worthy goals.

Certainly, America has serious problems, and there are many injustices that occur every day. This is part of the nature of human existence. But America is still the light of the world, and it is fortunate that the Hillsdale Academy exists, if only to remind students, parents, and educators of this important fact. ♣

Paul Jones on the *Bonhomme Richard* and the crews of *Taffey Three* in Leyte Gulf; the Marines and brave Navy officers at "Frozen Chosin"—these things endure.

But it is not only these things that provide us with the opportunity to remember and revere our past. In the peaceful pursuits of business, politics, religion, culture, and education, we can strive to understand and to pass on to our children the common principles and common virtues that make us essentially American. We can also introduce

the next generation to ancient concepts of honor, which have been cheapened for far too long.

In the *Funeral Oration*, the great Athenian statesman Pericles said two thousand years ago, "For it is only love of honor that never grows old; and honor it is, not gain as some would have it, that rejoices the heart of age and helplessness."

Honor never grows old, and honor gives the greatest joy, because honor is, finally, about defending noble and worthy things that deserve to

Honor never grows old, and honor gives the greatest joy, because honor is, finally, about defending noble and worthy things that deserve to be defended, even at a high cost.

be defended, even at a high cost. In our time, the cost may be social disapproval, public scorn, hardship, persecution, or even death.

Does honor have a future? Like all things human, it is always open to question. As free citizens, we can always fail to live up to the "better angels of our nature." After the conclusion of the Constitutional Con-

vention in 1787, a lady reportedly asked Benjamin Franklin, "Well, Doctor, what have we got—a republic or a monarchy?" Franklin replied, "A republic, if you can keep it."

And so honor has a future, if we can keep it. And we keep it only if we continue to esteem it, value those who display it, and refuse to laugh at it. ▲

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