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## The Assault on the Boy Scouts of America

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**MIDGE DECTER** is an author and editor whose essays and reviews, mostly in the field of social criticism, have appeared over the past four decades in a number of periodicals, including *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *The American Spectator*, *First Things*, *National Review*, *The New Republic*, and *The Weekly Standard*. She is a regular and frequent contributor to *Commentary*. She has published four books: *The Liberated Woman and Other Americans*; *The New Chastity and Other Arguments Against Women's Liberation*; *Liberal Parents, Radical Children*; and *An Old Wife's Tale: My Seven Decades in Love and War*. She has been the executive editor of *Harper's*, literary editor of *Saturday Review*, and a senior editor at Basic Books. From 1980 to 1990, she served as Executive Director of the Committee for the Free World, and from 1990 to 1995 she was a Distinguished Fellow of the Institute on Religion and Public Life. She is currently a member of the Board of Trustees of the Heritage Foundation, as well as of the Center for Security Policy, the National Forum Foundation/Freedom House, the Institute on Religion and Public Life, and the Clare Booth Luce Fund.

*The following is abridged from a speech delivered at a Hillsdale College seminar in Naples, Florida, on March 20, 2002.*

Let us take a few minutes to think about a 12-year-old American boy living in the early twenty-first century. Now, there are a number of things to say about this boy. Chances are, for instance, that absent the requisite amount of parental pressure, he is likely to be a bit of a slob: his room piled with trash, his hands dirty, his socks sliding down into untied shoes. Chances are, too, that as yet he has no definite idea as to whether he is on his way to being manly with his father or whether he wishes — at least some of the time — to remain in the now-humiliating but still comforting arms of his mother. And it is more than likely that he continues by and large to prefer the company of boys to that of girls.

So much, of course, he would surely have in common with a boy of his age of, say, 75 years ago. But in beginning to think about him, it seems important to remind ourselves that he is almost certain to be in better health than his earlier counterpart. It is likely, for example, that on the whole he has passed into pre-adolescence without being weakened by any of the diseases that were once the taken-for-granted hazards of childhood, such as measles, mumps, diphtheria, scarlet fever, or that once-upon-a-time blue terror of parents everywhere, polio. In short, except in the case of some accidental misfortune, he is not likely to have experienced much in the way of real physical suffering.

It also seems likely that much closer attention has been paid by those around him to the state of his emotions. Indeed, it is almost certain that he has,

from a very early age, been the object of ongoing scrutiny by *someone* in his life – if not parents, then relatives, neighbors, or school authorities – for any signs of impending social or psychic disturbance. (As such disturbance is, of course, nowadays defined: how many well-tended young American boys, for instance, are currently being medicated with amphetamines at the behest of someone in a position of responsibility for his education?)

So we must ask ourselves what a free and robust society would properly wish to have added to the upbringing of such a boy – beyond, that is, either the good luck or the private sorrows of his family life. The answer is, first of all, that such a society would surely wish to stress a boy's mindfulness of others. Next, it would wish for him to have in his life someone or some influence that would encourage him to aspire by setting a variety of goals for him to reach, by teaching him how he might reach them, and then by valuing him highly for doing so. And lastly, it would wish for him to come into at least the beginning of a consciousness of his debt: his debt to his family, to his community, and to his country.

Not a bad list, I would say. And as it happens, such a list of wishes for our 12-year-old pretty much defines the original and continuing purpose of the organization known as the Boy Scouts of America, an organization brought to the United States from Britain in 1910. Permit me to remind you of the Scout Oath, something which, even if one is familiar with it, bears repeating: "On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; to help people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight." As I said before, not bad. This oath contains a promise that our country's government officials, among others, might recite with a good deal of profit every morning before sitting down at their desks.

But, you might ask, has not this oath, more than once down through the years, been honored mainly in the breach – and by many apparently loyal Scouts? The answer is, no doubt it has. After all, the 110,000,000 boys who have, at one time or another during the past 90 years, become alumni of the organization, surely did not all remain consistently trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent, as the Scout Law would have them be. After all, we are talking here about *boys*. Some of them have very likely joined the Scouts merely to be with their buddies. Some perhaps became Scouts because of the appeal of going camping. Some were simply mad to wear a uniform. The point is

– especially in recent years, when the whole world has appeared to be mainly concerned with a boy's emotional stability or his academic achievement – in the Scouts he is required at least to *speak*, and in fact to speak often, of his wish to be trustworthy, thrifty, brave, helpful, loyal, and so on. And that, my friends, is very, very far from nothing. What better recipe for the making of citizens of a true republican democracy?

## Women's Liberation

**WE**, OF course, no longer live under what was originally intended by that term. Many factors, both historical and political, can be called to account for this unhappy fact. But perhaps the most damaging development of the last third of the past century has been a general willingness, in both the public and private spheres, to accede to the demands of certain groups out to achieve special legal and/or economic status as compensation for past suffering and discrimination. I should say *alleged* past suffering and discrimination, because while this demand was first brought by groups speaking in the name of America's blacks, who at least had a rightful case in view of their dreadful history in this country, certain illegitimate imitators of the blacks' success in pressing their claims inevitably followed.

Two groups in particular imitated the blacks' claim of having been oppressed and discriminated against, through a combination of distorting history, telling outright lies, and wielding considerable political and economic power, and in the process have done unbelievable damage to the fabric of American life. I am speaking, of course, of Women's Liberation and the homosexual rights movement.

And getting back to our 12-year-old boy – I do not intend to forget him for a minute – these two movements, each in its own way, now threaten him in a way that is related to, but goes far beyond, what any of us muddled parents or any pill-pushing experts can do.

The women's movement is seen by many who have not wished to be disturbed by it as no more than a way for women to begin asserting their rightful claim to equality in education and employment. Even at its mildest, however, the women's movement demands that women be given the right to seek freedom by redefining sex, marriage, motherhood, and career in whatever way they find least psychologically and physically burdensome to themselves. Furthermore, they

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make this demand in the name of their long oppression at the hands of men – *all* men: fathers, brothers, teachers, lovers, husbands, employers, the government, and, last but not least, the medical profession. All future relations with these various exploiters are henceforth to be arranged for a woman's convenience and in accordance with her desires and ambitions.

This list essentially covers the whole of society, and ideally the movement would impose regulations without end on all the relations between men and women, and boys and girls, in everyday life. As it is, it has managed, even though with less success than it had once dreamed of, to impose regulations aplenty, with dire consequences to follow from anyone's failure to live up to them: for instance, the claim currently known as "sexual harassment." Under this rubric, women who have been competing madly for more than a healthy share of the world's sum of power somehow at a moment's notice claim to have become shy and defenseless, unable to resist any kind of superior strength. I am reminded of 1991 when Justice Clarence Thomas was being put through hell as a result of the claim that he had sexually harassed a subordinate. A radio station at the time interviewed a group of female factory workers and asked them if they had ever been sexually harassed by their bosses. "No," one after another answered, "but if he had ever tried, by the time I got through with him, he would never try again, I promise you." Needless to say, such women neither belong to, nor would be welcome in, the women's movement.

Beyond this kind of legal onslaught against men, and perhaps above all, the women's movement has been pressing the demand for quick and easy and no-questions-asked abortion. This is the demand with the greatest popularity, since it is also supported by many women who may not necessarily share the movement's other attitudes. The legalization of abortion as the movement women have defined and fought for it – and won – requires that every female of reproductive age be granted an abortion *by right*, without intervention by parent or husband, for any reason and under any circumstance and at any time during her pregnancy; abortion, that is, as nothing more than an alternative form of birth control, even should such birth control ultimately turn out in reality to be infanticide. Winning the right to an abortion on demand has higher standing than most of the other demands pressed by the movement – say, that women should by right be equally represented in the boardroom and on the political ticket.

## The Homosexual Rights Movement

SO MUCH for the movement women. Perhaps the Scouts will succeed in making our boy into a sturdy citizen despite them, and perhaps he will find lifetime companionship among his fellow Scouts, and all together they will find the means for getting along with the distaff side. But what shall we say of the most recent rights movement, which, if not so widespread as the women's, is, in its way, easily as threatening – the homosexual rights movement. The homosexuals, too, decided to stand on their age-old oppression, though I like to believe that at least some of them at first felt rather sheepish about doing so. For after all, the very behavior involved in being a homosexual, once someone has discovered that he is one, has usually involved a certain sense of danger and adventure, of being in one's own world and set apart from those who are leading what the homosexuals call "straight" lives. True, before the movement came along, homosexuals were always potential outlaws, in danger of being harassed and sometimes worse by the police. Such experiences, on the other hand, were avoidable – if one wanted to avoid them – simply by acting on one's predilection in private and keeping it private. In any case, as the putative result of a police raid on a particularly low hangout in Greenwich Village, the homosexuals began to march and to demonstrate. And with each year their demonstrations became more extravagant and outrageous, and at the same time the so-called "enlightened" communities supporting them became less and less tolerant of any kind of expression of distaste for their newly aggressive public behavior. In San Francisco, the homosexual community became the center of great political and economic power. Did this, do you think, lead San Francisco's homosexuals to behave more respectably? On the contrary. They represented the greatest success of this rights movement, and as such grew more flamboyant, as it seemed, with every passing year.

Then came two further developments. First was the discovery that AIDS was running like murderous wildfire through the homosexual community. The medical professionals had long been aware that homosexuals were particularly prone to venereal diseases and other kinds of health problems that were uniquely rife among them. But AIDS was a new plague – a plague encouraged by the intensified and ever-varying forms of sexual promiscuity that were spreading through all the institutions of homosexual pleasure-seeking. Since AIDS had also become an affliction of those drug users so addicted and besotted as to share their needles, and dirty

needles at that, with others, fine liberal-minded folk began to declare that everyone, men and women, heterosexual and homosexual alike, were equally at risk of contracting AIDS. As it happened, everyone except the particularly credulous really knew that this was not so – but many people affected to believe it anyway, as a means of expressing sympathy and brotherhood for the dying victims. And so came the campaign to demand that science produce a cure. Vast amounts of money were raised and spent as a result of this campaign, and while a cure has not been found, at least the scientists have been able to produce substances for inhibiting the disease from developing beyond a relatively early stage – at a staggering cost both to society and to the individual users. It is an almost unbelievable irony that a murderous disease had become the occasion for those afflicted with it to garner ever greater cultural and political power.

## Target: Boy Scouts

I HAVE gone through this lengthy discussion of the culture of women's and homosexual rights and the great public outpouring of sympathy for those suffering from AIDS because, after more than 80 years of humming along in their accustomed way, our Boy Scouts – they of the innocent aspirations for innocent boys – ran smack up against the new terms of the liberal culture. It was, I suppose, bound to happen, and here is how it began to happen in particular: a young man named James Dale from New Jersey, who had been a most meritorious Scout – indeed, had earned his way to the highest rank of scouting and had then become an assistant scoutmaster – went public with the fact that he was a homosexual. The Scouts responded by asking for his resignation, following which all hell broke loose. Naturally, the American Civil Liberties Union was on the spot. Other cases like Mr. Dale's would subsequently come to light. And all over the country the various community funds, such as the United Way – funds that had been supporting the Scouts for years and years – declared that they were withdrawing their support from the Scouts. Other long-time supporters followed suit. Meanwhile, schools and park facilities where Scout troops had been meeting were suddenly closed to them and public denunciations rang through the air. In short, it was now our 12-year-old who, in the act of seeking to honor the Scout Law and Scout Oath, would find himself an outlaw.

No doubt, most of us already know all this. But so habituated have we become to public denunciations of our lack of what nowadays passes for liberality, that it sometimes seems to me we have lost our sense of outrage from the sheer habit of it.

Mark you: The Scouts did not *ask* Mr. Dale if he was a homosexual. Had the information not been pressed upon them, they would undoubtedly never have acted as they had. But now the fat was in the fire, and our 12-year-old was to become the object of an open tug-of-war between those who wished to recruit him for scouting and those who – make no mistake about it – wished to recruit him for homosexuality. This last assertion is, of course, denied by the spokesmen for the homosexual rights movement. They, along with all those public institutions that are being influenced by them, are, they say, merely fighting the good fight against discrimination. This fight, they say, is against discrimination in general, and in particular against such an identity-based injustice as exclusion from public accommodations, which is what the homosexual activists claim the Boy Scouts organization is.

To be sure, the Boy Scouts of America was not, and is not, the only institution subject to the movement's aspirations for homosexual recruitment. In school, for instance, our 12-year-old could very well have been presented with some version of a sex-education course – or what many prefer to call a “family health” course (to allow the schools to begin without protest in the very early grades) – whose curricula were being written with detailed counseling from leaders of an organization called the Gay Men's Health Crisis. This effort to teach so-called tolerance for those whose “lifestyle” might be different from the one known to the child within his own family has resulted in a number of pedagogic crimes against the young. I offer one example: the passing along of detailed instruction – I am talking here about fourth- to sixth-grade classes! – about (and I kid you not) the best and safest way to practice oral sex.

And such recruitment, as we know, also goes on in the culture generally, where the constant preachments of toleration have become so natural it is almost unnoticeable by now just what we are being asked to be tolerant *of*. So, young mister Dale or no young mister Dale, the Boy Scouts were a sitting target. Sooner or later they would either be forced to take an unaccustomed political stand or simply surrender the purpose of their existence.

## Boy Scouts in Court

THEY TOOK the stand, of course, and were at first rewarded for their loyalty to principle by losing

unanimously in the New Jersey Supreme Court. This vote was based on the argument that New Jersey law prohibits discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation in places of public accommodation. And, as I said, trouble burst out all around the country. Subsequently, the Scouts carried their case all the way to the United States Supreme Court, which by a 5-4 vote found in their favor — Rehnquist, O'Connor, Scalia, Kennedy, and Thomas in the majority, and Stevens, Souter, Ginsburg, and Breyer predictably voting against the Scouts.

Now, interestingly, in other ostensibly similar cases — that is, in public accommodations cases — the Court's decisions had required the Jaycees to open their membership to women because of the Minnesota Human Rights Act of 1984, and required the Rotary Clubs to do likewise because of a California law forbidding businesses from gender discrimination. In each of these cases the Court decided that the right of association of the organization in question had to give way to a more compelling state interest.

So much for the once sacred principle of freedom of association that is enshrined in the currently so little understood and so much abused United States Constitution. This is the same Constitution, you will recognize, now being so badly trounced by those whose blood seems to run ice cold at the very mention of the word "God" that it's hard to imagine how we will ever find our way back.

In the Boy Scout case, the majority's argument alluded not to freedom of association but rather to freedom of speech. Rehnquist wrote for the majority that "a state requirement that the Boy Scouts retain Dale as an assistant scoutmaster would significantly burden the organization's right to oppose or disfavor homosexual conduct. The state interests embodied in New Jersey's public accommodations law do not justify such a severe intrusion on the Boy Scouts' right to freedom of expressive association."

The matter did not end there, of course, and the anti-Scouts campaign continues apace — at the hands of the Los Angeles City Council, the New York City school board, and (big surprise) in San Francisco. Furthermore, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Dade County, Florida, Santa Barbara, California, and Framingham, Massachusetts, have halted all Scout recruitment in the schools and even prohibited the distribution of Boy Scouts material. Nor has it ended even there — I could go on and on about problems all over the country, the Scouts' crime being such, I suppose, as to cost them even privileges of citizenship itself.

## America's Boys at Risk

**IN SEPTEMBER** of 2001, the Scouts' national organization issued a public statement explaining their position. This statement is worth dwelling on for a minute. Among other things it says:

Today, young people and adults from every ethnic, religious, and economic background, in suburbs, on farms, and in cities, know and respect each other as they participate in our program. Boy Scouting makes no effort to discover the sexual orientation of any person. Scouting's message is, however, compromised when prospective leaders of youth present themselves as role models inconsistent with BSA standards. We believe an avowed homosexual is not a role model for the traditional moral values espoused in the Scout Oath and Law, and homosexual conduct is inconsistent with the values we wish to instill.

Such a statement leads one to wonder how many young members the organization will lose as a result of its holding firm to this position. Will our 12-year-old's parents be too "liberal" — for which read "too impotent in the face of the homosexual rights movement's ambitions for their son" — to allow him to join the Scouts? After all, we have everywhere seen the most ardent expressions of love and fellow-feeling for those who — nearly two decades after learning of the disease and by what behavior it is contracted — have become the so-called "victims" of AIDS. We have seen large audiences hotly applauding explicitly homosexual works of art intended for no other artistic purpose than to outrage the sensibilities of the very people who are applauding. And most impressive of all, at least to me, was witnessing how a certain New York City high-school teacher who admits to being the National Secretary of an organization called the North American Man-Boy Love Association — the proud sponsor of the sexual exploitation of little boys by men — was protected from being fired by both that city's educational bureaucracy and its teachers' union.

We have immunized our 12-year-old boy against measles and other debilitating things. The question is — and it is urgent — are we as a society, or are we not, prepared to immunize this child against a culture that holds all kinds of peril for his future inner well-being?

The authors of our Constitution could not in their wildest dreams have imagined such a problem

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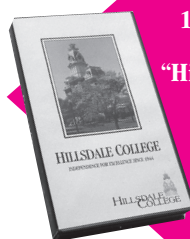
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*continued from page 6*

for the country's young male citizens. Even they, who in their collective genius understood well what kind of citizenry would be required to sustain the republic they were in the process of creating, could not have dreamed of how dangerously far our sloth in the face of a sickly culture would take us. The Court has only touched one, and by no means the most critical, aspect of this peril – and even then the victory was only by the slenderest of margins.

So there he is – our beautiful, sturdy, high-hearted, and yet still needy 12-year-old – of whom his country nowadays demands nothing that might ennoble him, not even that he salute its flag; of whom his community requires nothing that might enlarge his spirit, not even that he do it some small service; of whom his school asks little of his mind but that he in the end learn to master

the art of the multiple-choice question; and to whom it is a primary responsibility of his family to teach, among other things, at least some measure of prudence. I would not be so foolish as to maintain that the Boy Scouts of America, should they even be allowed to do so, could provide all he needs in the way of a defense against the culture's attacks on his well-being. But what must Americans of the future think of us – what must we think of ourselves – if we should in the end throw a generation of beautiful, sturdy, needy, uncertain, and longingly aspiring man-children to the wolves of sloth and cowardice? 

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