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The Content of Our Children's Character

Ward Connerly

Chairman, American Civil Rights Institute



WARD CONNERLY, author of a just-released autobiography, *Creating Equal: My Fight Against Race Preferences*, is founder and chairman of the American Civil Rights Institute, a national nonprofit organization aimed at educating the public about genuine nondiscrimination. Mr. Connerly was appointed to a 12-year term on the board of regents of the University of California in 1993. Two years later, he led the successful effort to eliminate the consideration of race, gender, and ethnic origin in the admissions, contracting, and employment activities of the university. In 1995, he became statewide chairman of the California Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI). In 1996, in one of the biggest news stories of the decade, the initiative was overwhelmingly approved by voters. A nationally recognized housing expert and a director of the California Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Connerly is also president and chief executive officer of Connerly and Associates, a Sacramento consulting firm that specializes in land use planning and development.

In February 1998, *Imprimis* featured his Shavano Institute for National Leadership speech, "Back to Equality."

Mr. Connerly delivered these remarks as the keynote address of Hillsdale College's Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Heroes for a New Generation and a New Century," on October 11, 1999, in Costa Mesa, California. He based his address on his latest book, Creating Equal: My Fight Against Race Preferences, available from Encounter Books (\$24.95).

In the course of a normal year, I probably give about 140 speeches, but there is none that fulfills me more than the chance to be at Shavano and with the Hillsdale College family. When I was invited to appear, I was offered the title, "The Content of Our Children's Character," but I was also given the opportunity to change that title if I preferred something else. I told my staff, "Don't you dare change it, because there could not be a more timely or more appropriate theme than this one." So, again, I am delighted to be with you to discuss this topic.

The issue of character has never mattered more in American society than it does now. And the content of our children's character is crucial to the survival of our nation.

Within the past several years, there has been a rash of violence in our nation. Consider the following:

- ✓ A young man by the name of Matthew Shepard was brutally beaten to death because he was gay.
- ✓ A black man in Texas was dragged to his death from the back of a pickup truck, solely because he was black.
- ✓ Another kills his family, goes into a stock brokerage house and lays waste to several human beings.

- ✓ High school children are using high-powered rifles to kill their classmates.
- ✓ In my own community of Sacramento, synagogues have been burned because of hatred of Jews.

In each instance, we engage in national hand-wringing about violence and witness outbursts of outrage by politicians who proclaim the need for tougher gun control measures and hate-crime legislation. Rarely, if ever, does anyone make the connection between these acts of violence and the "culture of relativity" that has been spawned in our nation.

Ours is a culture in which anything goes and nothing is absolute. Politicians constantly seek to convince us that left is right, east is west, and up is really down. If it gets votes, whatever you want to hear—"No problem!" Everything depends on "what the meaning of 'is' is," to quote our President. When there is "no controlling legal authority," conduct considered immoral in another time and place is acceptable.

In short, there has been a profound weakening of our national character. Yet we see no connection between this fact and the culture that has evolved from that erosion of national character. We see no relationship between the lack of respect for human life, as evidenced by the unbridled number of abortions performed every day in America, and the rampant lawlessness that has evolved in American society.

Let's define our terms. Character is about one's adherence to moral principles, and moral principles are standards of conduct that distinguish right from wrong. Moral principles are not relative to the political exigencies of the moment. In order for our children to have strong character, they must be taught certain moral principles. And we are cheating them when we fail to teach those principles.

The character of our children can be only as strong as the character of our nation, and currently there are serious problems with regard to the national character of America.

When someone like David Horowitz, who has been identified with civil rights for virtually all of his life, is called a racist in a major national magazine, but gets no apology, and seemingly no one is outraged about it, then we have a national character problem. Of course, the reason for this is that the person calling him a racist is a black columnist, and David was being critical of the conduct of certain black people.

When candidates for elective office publicly proclaim their opposition to de facto quotas and preferences based on race and ethnicity and then shy away from supporting efforts to end such policies, solely because they are afraid of being called racists or "anti-minority," then we have a national character problem.

When the President of the United States appears before a group of Hispanic leaders and states, in the most crass political terms possible, "America will soon look like you," thereby trying to appeal to Americans on the basis of their ethnic identity, then we have a national character problem.

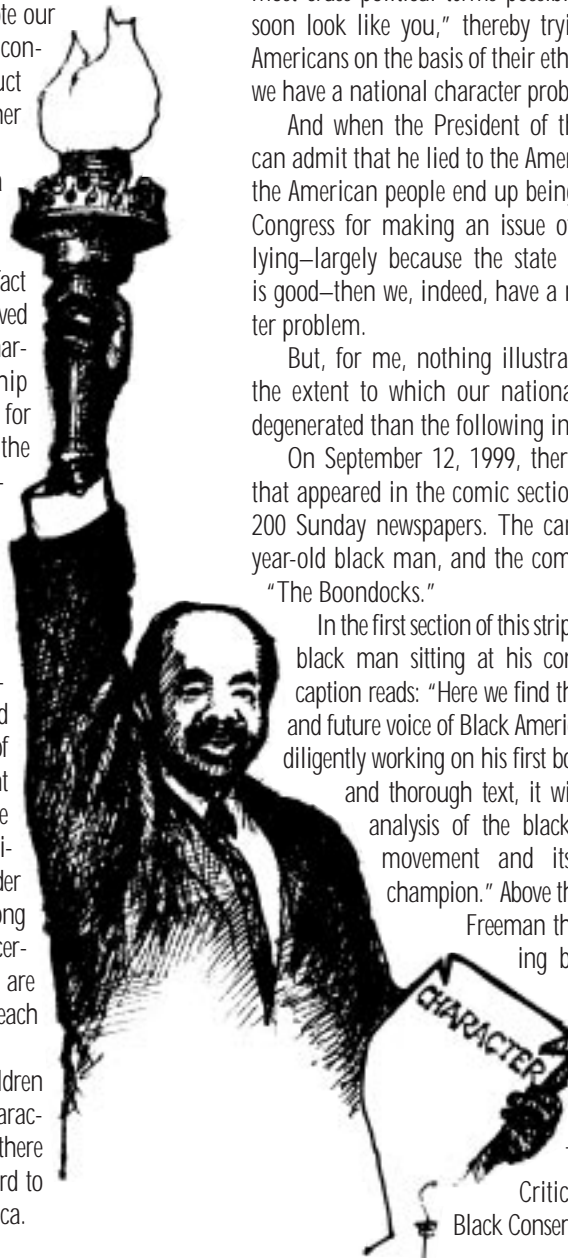
And when the President of the United States can admit that he lied to the American people, but the American people end up being angry with the Congress for making an issue of the President's lying—largely because the state of the economy is good—then we, indeed, have a national character problem.

But, for me, nothing illustrates more clearly the extent to which our national character has degenerated than the following incident:

On September 12, 1999, there was a cartoon that appeared in the comic sections of more than 200 Sunday newspapers. The cartoonist is a 25-year-old black man, and the comic strip is called "The Boondocks."

In the first section of this strip there is a young, black man sitting at his computer. The side caption reads: "Here we find the radical scholar and future voice of Black America Huey Freeman diligently working on his first book. An expansive and thorough text, it will offer a critical analysis of the black neoconservative movement and its most famous champion." Above the character Huey Freeman there is the following book title: "Ward

Connerly Should Be Beaten by Raekwon the Chef with a Spiked Bat." The subtitle is, "A Critical Analysis of Black Conservatives."



In the second section of the strip, Huey Freeman is urged to go back to the drawing board and find a new title, because the masses will not know who Raekwon the chef is.

In the third section, Huey Freeman does, indeed, produce a new book title: "Ward Connerly Is a Boot Licking Uncle Tom."

Over the past several years, I have learned to ignore intellectual degeneracy from those who find it necessary to resort to name-calling. But it is inexcusable in our nation for anyone to incite violence, to suggest that someone should be beaten with a spiked bat.

The most disgusting aspect of this incident is that this comic strip appears right next to other strips like *Peanuts* and *Marmaduke* that are widely read by our children. My daughter said she cried for two days when she saw this cartoon, because not too many people survive a beating with a spiked bat.

When we sent a letter to Universal Press Syndicate, the distributor of this cartoon, we received the following response: "This is satire. We didn't intend for it to be a death threat."

Forgive me, but I don't think that most eight- or ten- or twelve-year-old children appreciate the value of satire. As I have previously said, there is a connection between acts of violence and the values that govern our society. We cannot expect the content of our children's character to be strong when they are urged to use spiked bats to beat those with whom they disagree or to win debates by calling those with whom they disagree derogatory names instead of refuting their arguments intellectually.

After reading this strip, is it any wonder that black males might be tempted to use the creator of this strip as a role model and employ his tactics for dealing with controversy?

I learned long ago that character is something that you learn throughout life. The content of our children's character is nothing more and nothing less than the composition of their values.

I learned my values from my grandmother, a maternal aunt, and her husband, all of whom raised me after my mother died when I was four years old. I learned about courage and the importance of defending your beliefs. My uncle never got past the fifth grade, but he understood to his core the value of courage. He often said, "Boy, if you don't defend what you believe in, if you don't stand up for yourself, you're going to get your rear end kicked twice, once at school and the second time when you get home." So I learned the hard way that the defense of our values defines who we are.

I learned about the principle of equality from a professor, Dr. Robert Thompson, a tall, Lincoln-esque individual. I once challenged the proposition that "all men are created equal." I said, "This is phony. I was not born with an equal chance like some other students in college." Dr. Thompson replied, "Mr. Connerly, it's not the reality of equality that matters; it's the aspiration of equality that really matters. What's important is that you and I believe that we are equal and the nation continues to perfect that idea."

I learned about freedom and liberty from that uneducated uncle of mine, James Louis, to whom I made reference previously.

Back in 1954, my aunt and uncle and I traveled to Natchez, Mississippi from Sacramento, California. We drove nonstop, except for fuel and food. Lodging was unavailable for people with our skin color, and we could not enter public restaurants or use public restrooms. My aunt could enter through the side door of "greasy spoons," because her skin was light enough that she could "pass." This experience taught me about freedom and liberty. The memory of what it means to be treated differently because other people have passed a negative judgment on the color of your skin is forever etched in my mind.

These personal lessons in character building helped to prepare me for that fateful moment in November of 1994 when I was presented with compelling evidence that what the University of California regarded as "diversity" was nothing more than a fig leaf for a nefarious system of preferences and de facto quotas.

Once I learned that fact, it was not necessary for me to give any further reflection to the course that I would chart. To do less than oppose practices and policies that classify our citizens on the basis of race and ethnicity and confer public benefits on the basis of those classifications would be a serious flaw in my character and would betray the values that I have been taught to embrace.

Many of those programs that we call "affirmative action" are a perversion of the concept of equality. Having people of various backgrounds in our universities and in the work force is a noble objective. But diversity is not an excuse to discriminate. The methods by which this so-called diversity is attained are significantly more important than the outcome itself.

It is true that there is a cultural war going on in America, and the casualties are our children. It is not too late to correct that problem. We should begin by telling our children that character is about values and having the courage to defend

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Comparative Facts 1986-1999



	<u>1986</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>1999</u>
Full-time enrollment	1012	1131	1158 (Fall '98)
Distribution of degrees conferred			
Business and education	51%	34.5%	43.2%
Liberal arts	49%	65.5%	56.8%
Full-time faculty	68	86	88
Endowed chairs	5	14	19
Percentage of full-time faculty			
With terminal degrees	68%	82%	88%
Student Board scores (mean)			
ACT	21	26	26
SAT	930 (1040 recentered)	1200	1220
Entering students in top 10% of high school class	19%	38%	38%
Entering student mean high school G.P.A.	3.0	3.5	3.57
Percentage of entering students			
Below 2.5 high school G.P.A.	15%	1%	2%
In top 50% of high school class	74%	99%	99%
National Merit sponsoring institution	No	Yes	Yes
National Merit finalists enrolled	0	15	23
Represented in entering class:			
States	20	36	39
Foreign countries	3	8	9
Percentage of entering students from Michigan	61%	44%	50%
Placement percentage (6 mos. after graduation)	90%	95%	98%
Library square footage	23,182	41,682	41,682
Library books and other printed materials	117,157	167,229	259,200
Total library volumes	128,959	239,365	270,000
<i>Imprimis</i> subscribers	126,000	720,000	850,000 (June '99)
Scholarships and grants	\$2,508,666	\$6,320,658	\$7,271,000

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those values. Tell them that character is about being true to their beliefs even when others all around them strongly disagree with them. Tell our children that it is important for them to be good citizens and that they should demand that their elected representatives be honest and forthright, even if that honesty and candor might cost them an election or diminish their popularity.

I want to thank you for letting me share my heroes with you: my grandmother, my uncle, and Dr. Thompson. If the content of our children's character consists of an appreciation for the values of freedom, liberty, equality, and courage, then our nation will have a bright and glorious future.

Let me close with a passage from one of my favorite songs, as sung by Ray Charles:

"O Beautiful, for heroes proved,
in liberating strife.
"Who more than self their country loved,
and mercy more than life.
"America, America, God shed his grace on thee.
"And crown thy good with brotherhood
from sea to shining sea."

Thank you very much. God bless you. 🙏

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