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Moral Values. They're Baaaaak

The Clash of Moral Codes

**THEY SAID IT**

“According to Mr. Lloyd George, the future will be even more exclusively taken up than is the present with the economic problem, especially with the relations between capital and labor. In that case, one is tempted to reply, the future will be very superficial. When studied with any degree of thoroughness, the economic problem will be found to run into the political problem, the political problem in turn into the philosophical problem, and the philosophical problem itself to be almost indissolubly bound up at last with the religious problem.”

*Democracy and Leadership, Irving Babbitt*

“One person with a belief is a social power equal to ninety-nine who have only interests.”

*John Stuart Mill, Considerations on Representative Government, 1861.*

**MORAL VALUES. THEY'RE BAAAAACK.**

During the past couple weeks, I have read and listened to many excellent commentaries on the election, on American politics today, and on what to expect in the second Bush term. Needless to say, I have also read and listened to an enormous amount of nonsense on each of these subjects. On balance, I have found the nonsense to be more informative.

Taken individually, dumb statements are just dumb. But, as with the great pointillist painters, when their insipid little dots are joined together on a canvas, astonishing images emerge. Such is the talk of the Democrats in this post-election period.

The foreign policy arena is a particularly fertile ground for finding statements and predictions by Democrats that range from the foolish to the imbecilic but, when considered as a whole, tell much about why John Kerry lost the election and why the Democrats no longer control either the Senate or the House. But that's a subject for another issue. This week I would like to reflect a little on the picture that emerges from listening to Democrats discuss “moral values.” Therein lies a mother lode of information on what ails the Democratic Party today and where it might be headed.

Steve and I have written scores of articles over the years concerning the relationship between morality and both political *and economic* success. These articles have included references that range over thousands of years of human history. But on the subject of the American government, they have all encompassed the wisdom of John Adams, who noted that the U.S. constitution was designed “only for a moral and religious people,” and would be “wholly inadequate for the government of any other.”

As regards economics, our conclusions have, in one way or another, always reflected the views of Adam Smith, who first noted the important relationship between capitalism and religion when he argued that commercial society cannot thrive in a climate of moral decay; or to put it another way, that successful capitalism requires more than an effective legal system, but also must operate within a moral framework for, as Machiavelli put it years earlier, “the fear of the Prince” can only “temporarily supply the want of religion.”

The political punditry became somewhat interested in the subject of morality in politics during the Clinton years. But it was a largely prurient interest and the conversation was ultimately inconclusive. Republicans maintained that the oval office was no place for moral cripple. Democrats said it depended on your definition of a moral cripple. The U.S. Senate finally decided that while Bill wasn't perfect, he was good enough for them, which basically affirmed the Democrat argument. And it all went away.

And now its back. And it's back with a special vengeance because this time the message concerning the importance of moral values came directly from the voters in the clear and unmistakable form of an electoral defeat of significant proportion. And this time the message could not be dismissed as a simple reaction to the antics of one louche individual. This time the message was quite clearly aimed at the Democratic Party itself, which is increasingly viewed by Middle America as the spawning ground for the cultural rot that they see spreading across the nation.

And this hit the liberal community hard. Because it struck at the heart of what makes liberals feel good about themselves. Conservatives do not generally cite their political beliefs as evidence of their moral worth. Their conservatism flows from their beliefs, not the other way around. With the liberal elite, their sense of moral value inevitably stems from their political ideology. The phrase is not “I am moral, therefore I am a liberal.” It is instead, “I am a liberal, therefore I am moral.”

Bill Clinton once explained this distinction to Tom Brokowitz, when he asserted that for liberals like himself “character” is demonstrated “most effectively” not by what you do in your personal life but by “what you fight for and for whom you fight” on the battlefield of politics. Thus, the attack on the moral values of liberalism was an attack on the moral values of its adherents, which explains why the most outspoken liberals didn't fire back against the conservatism of their critics, but against their religious beliefs.

Now some have argued that the poll that raised the moral values issue was flawed, that the message it carried was ambiguous at best. But deep down in their hearts, Democrats sense, even if they don't fully understand it, that if anything that poll understated the problem they face on the moral values front. Ample evidence of this awareness has been demonstrated in the overwrought reaction that the poll elicited among the Democrat Party elite and the liberal punditry. A less compelling charge would have been ignored, or lost in the general post election din.

One of the most common responses to the “moral values” issue came from those whom I call the “simple folk,” who were just plain confused about the exact nature of the moral shortcomings that liberals are being accused of harboring.

A good example of how this crowd feels occurred when Peter Jennings asked George Stephanopoulos why “moral values” wasn't even on ABC's list of important election issues, and the one-time gofer for Bill Clinton who is now one of ABC's liberal political

gurus explained that the phrase was too ambiguous, or as he put, because it “means different things to different people.”

From one perspective, Stephanopoulos was correct. As I noted above, the term does indeed have a radically different meaning for people such as Bill Clinton. But, whether Pete and George know it or not, the fact is that among those voters who cited moral values as a key factor in their decision to vote against John Kerry, there is little if any ambiguity in the meaning of the phrase.

Each might offer a different example as to his or her specific concern or concerns, but in essence each was, by citing moral values as a key issue, affirming a commitment to the Judeo-Christian moral principles that underlie the traditional mores, customs, and culture of the United States and expressing a genuine fear that these “values” are rapidly evaporating and leaving a moral swamp in their wake.

A second common liberal reaction, from those whom I call the troglodytes, was anger at and disdain for the poor benighted souls who, in the words of Bruce Reed, Chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council, were not smart enough to realize that they are “the very people who will suffer the most” when they vote for “an administration whose overriding motive has been to protect the rich.”

Examples of this attitude abound. But one of my favorites came from ultra-liberal *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, who offered the following insight into the moral values voters.

I think a case could be made that ignorance played at least as big a role in the election’s outcome as values . . . This is scary. How do you make a rational political pitch to people who have put that part of their brain on hold? No wonder Bush won . . . There’s a fair amount of cluelessness in the ranks of the values crowd . . . A more practical approach might be for Democrats to add teach-ins to their outreach efforts. Anything that shrinks the ranks of the clueless would be helpful.

Not to be outdone, the liberal, web-based, political magazine *Slate* ran an amazingly rabid screed entitled “Why Americans Hate Democrats – A Dialogue” by the “progressive,” Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Jane Smiley, in which she offered the following.

The election results reflect the decision of the right wing to cultivate and exploit ignorance in the citizenry. I suppose the good news is that 55 million Americans have evaded the ignorance-inducing machine. But 58 million have not. (Well, almost 58 million—my relatives are not ignorant, they are just greedy and full of classic Republican feelings of superiority.) . . .

The reason the Democrats have lost five of the last seven presidential elections is simple: A generation ago, the big capitalists, who have no morals, as we know, decided to make use of the religious right in their class war against the middle class and against the regulations that were protecting those whom they considered to be their rightful prey—workers and consumers. The architects of this strategy knew perfectly well that they were exploiting, among other unsavory qualities, a long American habit of virulent racism, but they did it anyway, and we see the outcome now—Cheney is the capitalist arm and Bush is the religious arm. They know no boundaries or rules. They are predatory and resentful, amoral, avaricious, and arrogant. Lots of Americans like and admire them because lots of Americans, even those who don’t share those same qualities, don’t know which end is up. Can the Democrats appeal to such voters? Do they want to? The Republicans have sold their souls for power. Must everyone?

And this brings us to the third major category of Democratic reaction to the “moral values” issue, namely those politicians and pundits who do in fact want to appeal to such voters, or as Ms. Smiley put it,

to sell “their souls for power.” I call these Democrats the “they want moral values, we’ll give them some moral values” crowd, or “the dreamers,” for short.

The super-liberal House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi from San Francisco is one of the biggies on this idea. In a somewhat confused discourse, she told CNN’s Wolf Blitzer that because “faith is such an important part of the lives of most people in our country” Democrats have to convince voters that “many of the people who are in politics on the Democratic side do so according to the -- the gospel of Matthew and indeed the Bible.” She admitted that “we don’t demonstrate it clear [sic] enough ” but argued that “Democrats are faith-filled” and vowed to get this fact across better in the future.

Hillary joined in on this theme in a post-election speech at Tufts University, asserting that Democrats should, in response to the use of the Bible by conservatives to support their opposition to gay marriage, routinely cite the words of Jesus to support the liberal agenda for helping the poor and doing other good works.

It should be noted here that Hillary is one of the few liberal Democrats around who is not new to this argument, but has been forcefully maintaining for many years now that Democrats should not let Republicans have a lock on the moral values argument. Back in 1996, for example, she asked a gathering of the National African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church the following questions. “How could I deny Jesus health care or education? How could I deny Jesus a home that was safe and a neighborhood that was safe?” And then she went on to state her belief that the nation would be better off “if all of us could begin to think like that.”

So what does this mish-mash of opinions say about the Democrats today and where their Party is headed?

Well, it is worth noting that two of the above mentioned groups have no plan whatsoever. The “simple folk” are so confused as to the nature of “moral values” that they know not where to turn. And

the “troglodytes” are so angry and disdainful of their critics that they couldn’t focus on a useful response if they tried.

Only “the dreamers” have a plan, which is to liberally sprinkle their politics with “moral values.” Their problem is that this plan will most certainly prove impossible to implement. Why? Because if the turtle could run like a rabbit, he wouldn’t be a turtle. He’d be a rabbit. If Democrats had the kind of moral values that their critics claim they lack, they wouldn’t be Democrats. They’d be Republicans.

With all due respect, Ms. Pelosi and Ms. Clinton are as ignorant of the nature of the “moral values” issue as the “simple folk” are. And to the degree that they believe that they can convince the moral values crowd that Democrats share their values, Pelosi and Clinton are being as disdainful of the intelligence of this crowd as the troglodytes are.

Indeed, Nancy Pelosi can loudly proclaim the sincerity of the religious beliefs of her fellow Democrats from the highest mountain, and Hillary can talk of Jesus day in and day out. But if these two ladies were to inform their politics with the kinds of moral values that would impress the audience they hope to impress, they would both be on the outside of the Democratic Party looking in.

Space does not allow a comprehensive defense of this view, but it begins with my firm belief that the moral values concern among Republican voters has little if anything to do with professions of faith or talk of Jesus, as Nancy and Hillary seem to think.

While I don’t have any polls to support this opinion, I would argue, as I did earlier in this article, that those who voted the Republican ticket because of “moral values” did so because they are distressed about the cultural decay that is going on around them, and they blame it on politicians whose policies and attitudes seem to promote and applaud this decay, namely the Democrats.

As I said earlier, each of these individuals may have his or her special and specific example of this decay. But by and large they all share a common concern. Many books have been written on this subject, but I think the following paragraphs from my old friend Claes Ryn's classic study of contemporary American politics, *The New Jacobins*, states it better than most.

Instances of fading self-discipline are prominent in all aspects of social life. Drug abuse is rampant. Sexual promiscuity is so common as to be considered almost normal and causes epidemics of venereal disease and AIDS. Abortions are performed in staggering numbers as a form of birth control. The family is losing its cohesion and plays a much-reduced role as transmitter of civilized values. Standards of personal behavior and deportment are falling. Old-fashioned honesty and integrity yield to shadiness and opportunism. Carelessness pushes out good workmanship. Commercialism is more and more obtrusive. Spending for consumption through borrowing is the order of the day both for individuals and government . . . In education, standards are low, and the ideological fads and nostrums of the day replace attention to the insights and achievements of the ages. At the same time, diversions from real problems and responsibilities are everywhere. Entertainment forms an increasingly prominent part of Western culture and plays a central role in breaking down lingering traditional tastes and inhibitions. In the arts, the incidence of the crude, the ugly, and the offensive illustrates a collapse of aesthetical judgment. The churches try to avoid the subjects of individual sin, repentance, and character and offer a largely sentimental message of "love" and "compassion." Old distinctions between what is morally admirable and deplorable are radically challenged. Behaviors are accepted or held up for emulation that once were considered abhorrent.

It is easy to understand why Democrats would like to disassociate themselves from these trends. But they cannot do so. For the cultural decay described above is as much a by-product of liberalism's disdain for traditional moral principles as is the rise of the moral values voter among Republicans.

As for the future of the Democratic Party, while the cacophony of chatter that rose in response to the "moral values" issue ranged from the foolish to the imbecilic, the message that emerged from the din was clear, and that is that Democrats will remain much the same as they are today. There will be more talk of Jesus and more public displays of faith. And some voters will buy into the act. But John Kerry, the Party's recent standard bearer, said all that needed to be said when he declared that the gross humor of Whoopi Goldberg represented "real American values," as far as he and his party were concerned.

This is not to say that the Democrat Party has seen its best days. For while the Democrats are going through rough times at the present, they can find considerable cause for hope in the relentless social decay that was described above by Claes and which continues to slouch its way across the American landscape. Should this continue unabated, the Democrats will be back in high cotton at some future point. And this is certainly not beyond the realm of possibility, for Republicans should keep in the mind the words of T.S. Eliot, who cautioned that victories in the great cultural war are always temporary. "We fight," Eliot said, "rather to keep something alive than in the expectation that it will triumph."

## THE CLASH OF MORAL CODES

The soul-searching and introspection that customarily occupy the losing party after a particularly bitter election contest are usually quite valuable. The process of taking stock of failures and weaknesses and assessing possible cures for these woes can be grueling and painful, but it is often useful and therefore almost never done in vain.

Given this, I initially thought that rank-and-file Democrats could take heart from the fact that a significant segment of their party's elite managed to stave off full-blown psychosis in the wake of the election by going through just such a process of reflection and reevaluation. But after reading about the specifics of their deliberations, I believe that this is one of those rare occasions when the process will, in fact, be in vain, when the ruminations of the party's leaders will produce precious little that is either positive or actionable.

In fact, in my opinion it is not inconceivable that when all is said and done the Democratic Party will be in worse shape than it was before all this navel-gazing began. The few remaining sane Democrats may well be trying to go about this process in a routine and rational manner, eschewing the psychotic rantings of their brethren on the left, but I have serious doubts as to whether their self-examination will produce any answers. Indeed, as far as I can tell, no Democrat really even understands the questions.

The primary stumbling block for the erstwhile Democratic reformers is the fact that 22% of voters told exit pollsters that "moral values" was the single most important issue to them in their vote calculation, more than any other single issue. While the less-than-sane Democrats and assorted liberal hangers-on have taken this to mean that Bush voters are ignorant, bigoted, superstitious boobs whose opinions shouldn't matter since they are informed only by ancient and medieval fanaticism, the sane Democrats have taken it as an indication that they and their candidates need to "speak the language of religion" more effectively, so that they may thereby convince the red state yokels that they too have values.

The consensus from party leaders such as Hillary Clinton (who is now the clear and unchallenged titular head of the party) and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi is that Democrats need to convey to Christian voters that they both understand their religion and are comfortable with it. Or as Pelosi put it, that they "identify" with the fact that "faith is such an important part" of their lives.

There is little doubt that the approach of these comparatively sane Democrats is, well, saner than that of the insane Democrats, who wax poetic about moving to the frozen tundra of Canada or re-enacting the bloodiest epoch in this nation's history by seceding and forming The United States of Blue-istania. But whether the sane approach is any more firmly grounded in reality is another question altogether. I'd hate to say that any of the left wing nuts like Lawrence O'Donnell or Jane Smiley (see Mark's piece) are onto something. But if you ask me who has a better grasp of the situation, I'd say that the guys who know that their "values" are incompatible with those of Red Staters are far closer to the truth than those who think that they can make everything better if they simply get more comfortable with the language of those to whom they refer in private as the "Jesus Freaks."

In any case, if the Democrats are ever again going to wield the power of a national majority party, they will first have to address a serious shortcoming, namely the fact that they have no earthly idea what the Red Staters mean by "moral values." In their self-absorbed lives, liberal elites have almost no direct contact with Red State conservatives and therefore have nothing more than a vague and incorrect notion that the term "moral values" has to do specifically with the Bible and with the literal interpretation of it.

Now, the nuts don't really care much about the issue beyond that point, since they know that they hate the Bible and that those who read it are ill-bred hypocrites with whom they have nothing in common. But the sane Democrats do care. And given the tenor and topic of their discussions over the last couple of weeks they also believe that if they too read the Bible, they will be able to communicate with the "Christers" and be able to connect with them on a political level.

But it doesn't work that way. Even in their insanity, the nuts grasp the problem better, understanding as they do that the conceptions of morality that distinguish the Reds from the Blues are largely irreconcilable. They are, of course, wrong about which of the two conceptions is the dominant one in the United States, and they are equally wrong as to

which represents an “enlightened” view. But at least they understand that the two conceptions are distinct and that the discrepancy between them cannot be bridged through mere manipulation of language.

Soon after I rejoined Mark at The Political Forum, more than a year-and-a-half ago, I penned a piece on the left’s flirtation with anti-Semitism in which I laid out, as comprehensively as possible in this format, the principal and defining differences between the respective moral schemes of the left and right. I put it thusly:

While it is reasonably easy to define the conservative moral code (it is, after all *conservative*, and is thus rooted in tradition and in the belief in immutable, universal principles), it has been far more complicated to define the liberal moral scheme. The easiest way to describe it would, I suppose, be simply to label it Marxist, or Marxist-Gramsci-ist, to be more accurate.

Now, in saying that, I do not mean that the morality of the left is based on Marx as he is commonly understood. I’m not talking about revolution, and means of production, and collectivization, and all that other garbage. By adding Antonio Gramsci, the early twentieth century Italian Marxist, to the equation, we eliminate the notion that we are talking exclusively about economics. No longer are we talking merely about the proletariat versus the bourgeoisie; rather, we are talking about the broader and more general terms of dominant class versus subordinate class, of a morality based on the concepts of the oppressors and the oppressed. The left, the Marxists, generally define right and wrong in these terms: what helps the oppressors is by definition evil, and what helps the oppressed is by definition good.

In practical terms, good is defined as that which benefits workers, or ethnic minorities, or women, or indigenous peoples, etc. Evil is that which benefits capital, white men, men in general, imperialists, and so on.

Given all of this, it is hardly surprising that the losers of the battle over “moral values” would presume that the battleground was restricted to issues of culture and faith. After all, the matters of culture and faith provide the backdrop on which the dichotomy between the moral systems appears at its starkest.

For example, the general conservative position is that abortion is a “life” issue. Whether or not one believes that life begins at conception, the central question revolves around the concept of human life and whether or when it is or is not permitted, given historical and religious standards, to take that life.

For liberals, though, abortion is not about life. It’s about liberation, liberation from the pre-Roe male-dominated societal structure. Abortion represents more than just the ability to have or not to have a child. It represents women’s freedom and their right to determine their own fate.

So it is also with gay marriage. It is no coincidence that the left couches its arguments about gay marriage in “civil rights” terms. For them, it is a question of rights and liberation, a matter of removing the final tool by which the straight majority has oppressed the gay minority. Marriage per se is not the issue. It is merely the means by which the left intends to achieve the ends of full societal acceptance of homosexuality.

Ironically, the right, for its part, rightly sees the advance of gay marriage in much the same terms, sensing the intention of the left to use the issue as a tool of its own to level traditional social norms. It may bolster the left’s sense of moral superiority to insist that opponents of gay marriage are universally bigoted, but that view is itself built on ignorance, most especially of mainline Christian acceptance of gays. As I noted last week, the real issue for the right with regard to gay marriage is retaining the ability to decide

this issue in a democratic manner, “rather than have it imposed . . . by a liberal judicial elite.”

The greater challenge, as mainstream Democrats now see it, is for them to expand the base of issues in which “moral values” calculations play a role beyond the culture war, so as to use such calculations to their advantage, presuming as they do that they hold the moral high ground on a host of other policy matters. And this they appear to believe they can do by “talking the talk” to religious folk.

In their arrogance and ignorance of “average Americans,” the likes of Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi have assumed that the moral values voters are unthinking and that their blind faith in scriptural text can be exploited by liberal politicians smart enough to couch their policy positions on the economy, welfare, and the environment in the language of religion. In her speech at Tufts University last week, Hillary Clinton declared that, “No one can read the New Testament of our Bible without recognizing that Jesus had a lot more to say about how we treat the poor than most of the issues that were talked about in this election.”

Though it sounds high-minded, this is pure sophism, arrogant and condescending. It presumes both that Red Staters evaluate all policy matters other than cultural issues with no consideration at all for morality and that simply talking a good game will convince these poor, simple folks to change their ways and see the light. But both of these assumptions are based exclusively on liberal hubris.

Red Staters are neither stupid nor morally pliable enough to believe that they will be better people if they surrender their personal responsibility to minister to their less fortunate brothers to the impersonal, unfeeling secular state, no matter how loudly and assertively Democrats insist that the Bible requires them to do so. Much to Hillary’s dismay, moral values calculations already affect choices on domestic policy issues, just not in the way she wants them to.

The same, incidentally, can be said about foreign policy issues. And it is here that I think the most important lesson for the Democratic Party lies. Last week, I suggested that the liberals would be wise to expunge the word “Vietnam” from their vocabularies. Though I didn’t say so explicitly, the primary reason that Vietnam is such an albatross around the Democrats’ collective neck is that it reminds voters that at its heart, the Democratic Party’s moral code is different from that of the nation’s founders. It is different from that of Abraham Lincoln. It is different from that of Franklin and Teddy Roosevelt, and from that of the majority of Americans. Since Vietnam, the liberal supposition has been that the United States, as the most powerful party in any conflict, is also the morally inferior party.

Though a great many Americans disagreed with the Vietnam War and a great many of those did so for honorable reasons, the predominant voices on the left opposed the war because they believed it was immoral; that America’s tactics and even its aims exposed the United States as a bully and oppressor. From Noam Chomsky to Seymour Hersh to Jane Fonda to John Kerry, the leading lights of the left insisted that the Americans were the war criminals, the butchers, the impenitent murderers. Even today, after thirty-plus years of brutal Communist autocracy in Vietnam; after more than a million boat people; after more than two million slaughtered by the ideologically sympathetic Khmer Rouge in neighboring Cambodia, the left cannot bring itself even to entertain the thought that perhaps the Americans were the good guys and the indigenous Communists were not.

And this storyline has changed precious little in the three-and-a-half decades since. Throughout the Cold War, on the battlefields of Grenada, El Salvador and Nicaragua, the left always presumed the United States to be the aggressor and the oppressor. When Kuwait was invaded and occupied by a hostile army, the leftist elites, again supported by John Kerry, refused to condone American efforts to liberate our tiny, defenseless ally. Even in the current wars – both in Iraq and against the broader threat from radical Islam – wars in which one would presume that even the left

would be convinced of America's uprightness, their instinctive reaction has been to "blame America first" and to presume the worst about American aims. As (erstwhile leftist) author Christopher Hitchens noted last week:

From the first day of the immolation of the World Trade Center, right down to the present moment, a gallery of [leftist] pseudointellectuals has been willing to represent the worst face of Islam as the voice of the oppressed. How can these people bear to reread their own propaganda? Suicide murderers in Palestine—disowned and denounced by the new leader of the PLO—described as the victims of "despair." The forces of al-Qaida and the Taliban represented as misguided spokespeople for antiglobalization. The blood-maddened thugs in Iraq, who would rather bring down the roof on a suffering people than allow them to vote, pictured prettily as "insurgents" or even, by Michael Moore, as the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers.

Needless to say, this offends a great many Americans, who know that while their nation is far from perfect, it is nevertheless a force for good in the world, perhaps the greatest such force the world has ever known. If the Democrats so desire, they can continue to delude themselves that the "moral values" cited by voters two weeks ago had to do only with the culture war. But I believe that they had quite a bit to do with the real war, the war on terror, as well.

In fact, looking at it in retrospect, I think it is quite possible that the Democrats lost the battle over "moral values" when they chose to nominate a man who not only isn't certain that he believes in the current American cause, but who has, over the last three decades, been one of the loudest and most consistent voices accusing this nation and its armed forces of the most heinous moral failings. Is it any wonder, then, that they also lost the election?

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