

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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IN SEARCH OF THE CAUSE

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In an essay entitled "Politics and the English Language," written in 1946, George Orwell argued that political disorder was inevitably accompanied by a deterioration in the clear use of language. Language, he said, "becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish," and "slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." So I thought it was ironic when Bill Clinton, in response to the Oklahoma tragedy, called for a broad national discussion on "what is causing the United States to commit the whole range of violence we see."

I assume what Bill meant is that he wants a discussion of the cause of the increase in violence that appears to be occurring within the United States. And, judging from his accompanying remarks, it would seem that he would like special concentration on the roll of government, both as a causal factor and as a potential participant in any attempt to stem the tide.

Not being one to ignore the call of my nation's leader, I thought this week I would offer a few thoughts on the subject. This would seem to be a worthwhile topic, since the tranquility of U.S. society, and thus the environment in which U.S. businesses operate, depends heavily on the success of the government's efforts to keep order. And this success in turn depends to a great degree on whether those in charge of these efforts have an accurate assessment of the cause of any increases in disorder.

If, for example, Rush Limbaugh and other conservative radio talk show hosts are responsible, which appears to be one of Bill's many theories (assuming this wasn't just pure cant), it would seem to me that hiring more FBI agents will have little impact. Bill would be better off to simply have the talk show hosts arrested for inciting mayhem.

I would argue that the problem of increased violence in our society has nothing to do with heightened political rhetoric from the right. I think those who believe this have their *post hoc* confused with their *propter hoc*.

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In a free society, times of great social turmoil, such as we are experiencing today, inevitably produce outspoken public commentators who advocate a slower rate of social change; who argue strenuously on behalf of tradition and custom, what Russell Kirk used to call "the permanent things;" and who debate what are known as "first principles." Regarding the latter, Irving Babbitt once noted that, "when it comes to first principles, the issue raised is not one of moderation, but of truth or error."

In this same vein, I would argue that, contrary to the observation of some conservatives, Bill Clinton is also not to blame. Just as the appearance of heated social commentary is a sign of politically difficult times, the election to the presidency of a man who is known for questionable moral behavior is probably inevitable in an age marked by a general decline in morality nationwide. During such times, much of the public doesn't want a president they can "look up to," but would prefer having someone who makes them feel more comfortable about their own lifestyle choices.

The fact is that the roots of American disorder go much deeper than radio talk show hosts or Bill Clinton. In my opinion, the search for the "cause" Bill is seeking must begin with the simple premise that men and women are not naturally "good." They need to be taught, among other things the difference between right and wrong.

If this isn't done, they grow up to be little better than animals, entirely self centered, and therefore unsuited to the needs of the greater society, and in many cases downright vicious. In short, in order for a society to function with a minimum of violence, its citizens need to be assertively civilized. They need to learn what Aristotle called "moral virtue," which he said was taught by repetition and learned, if at all, at a very early age.

Citing Aristotle, C. S. Lewis put it this way in his remarkable little book, *The Abolition of Man*. "The little human animal will not at first have the right responses. It must be trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likable, disgusting and hateful . . . Without the aid of trained emotions, the intellect is powerless against the animal organism." In a now well known quotation, he added, "I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite skeptical about ethics, but bred to believe that 'a gentleman does not cheat,' than against an irreproachable moral philosopher who had been brought up among sharpers."

Even the most primitive societies understand this. Most establish elaborate systems for civilizing their young. The fundamental unit in these systems is invariably the family, and the teachings are virtually always deeply imbued with the idea that they are based on some divine order.

More advanced societies establish elaborate networks of educational and cultural institutions to aide in the process; to inculcate citizens with the customs, mores, history, in short, the culture of which they are a part. History teaches that a breakdown in the functioning of the family and other civilizing institutions, as is occurring in the United States today, inevitably leads to increased violence in the community. It's that simple.

Mitigating this problem is, of course, not simple. As I see it, there are basically two possible approaches. The first would be for the government to temporarily build up law enforcement mechanisms, while citizens launch an extended effort to bolster and support the nation's

traditional civilizing institutions. Government can do little overt in this latter effort, but it could cease doing things that undermine the process.

The second would be to permanently increase the power of the government, most especially by creating a much larger federal police force and giving them greatly expanded powers. This latter approach would involve a tacit declaration that America's traditional civilizing institutions are out of date; that they are simply not workable in a modern society; that they are founded on little more than superstition; and that henceforth the government will assume the bulk of the responsibility for maintaining an orderly society, mostly via police powers.

One of the nation's most thoughtful social scientists, James Q. Wilson, presented the choice this way, in the September, 1994 issue of *Commentary*. "There are only two restraints on behavior--morality, enforced by individual conscience or social rebuke, and law, enforced by the police and the courts. If society is to maintain a behavioral equilibrium, any decline in the former must be matched by a rise in the latter (or vice versa). If familial and traditional restraints on wrongful behavior are eroded, it becomes necessary to increase the legal restraints."

It is worthwhile to note here that America's founding fathers were well aware of this trade off between liberty and order, and spent a great deal of time and energy grappling with the issue. They were also very familiar with classical literature and were therefore mindful of the Aristotelian premise that if a government is to endure, it must reflect the ethos, or body of moral habits and beliefs of the people.

With these two thoughts in mind, they came to believe that a form of representative democracy, which provided a maximum of individual liberty, would work well for their particular constituencies. History records that at the heart of this decision was an understanding that Americans of that time were a deeply religious people with strong moral beliefs. As John Adams explained quite simply in 1789, "Our Constitution was designed only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."

This thought was reflective of an idea advanced by Edmund Burke, a contemporary of Adams and a strong supporter of the American Revolution. According to Burke, "Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites; in proportion as their love of justice is above their rapacity; in proportion as the soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumptions; in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters."

This theme was echoed by Washington in his farewell address, when he noted that "of all the dispositions and habits, which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Mortality are indispensable supports. . . . Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of

peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect, that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

The Declaration of Independence states unequivocally, in the second sentence, that the rights of man are not granted by the government, but by God. It states that these rights are "unalienable" not because some dictator, King, or central committee declared them to be so, but because man's "Creator" did so.

The Bill of Rights unquestionably reflects the Judeo-Christian beliefs of the founding fathers: freedom of expression, belief, assembly, petition, the dignity of the individual, the sanctity of the home, the reservation of powers to the people, and equal justice under law. Regarding this latter point, the entire system of justice they devised strongly reflects Judeo-Christian assumptions about human nature.

This close relationship between the wide range of individual freedom provided for by American democracy and the religiosity of its population has been remarked on by observers throughout the nation's history.

o Tocqueville, in 1835, noted: "I do not know whether all Americans have a sincere faith in their religion--for who can search the human heart?--but I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions. This opinion is not peculiar to a class of citizens or to a party, but it belongs to the whole nation and to every rank of society . . . While the law permits the Americans to do what they please, religion prevents them from conceiving, and forbids them to commit, what is rash or unjust."

o Orestes Brownson, another of the 19th century's most thoughtful commentators on American society, put it this way: "Ask the kings, nobility, or even church dignitaries, why they support religion, and they will answer with one voice, 'Because the people cannot be kept in order, cannot be made to submit to their rulers, and because civil society cannot exist, without it.' The same, or a similar answer will be returned by almost every political man in this country: and truly may it be said, that religion is valued by the Protestant world as an auxiliary to the state, as a mere matter of police."

o Paul Johnson, author of my all-time favorite history book, *Modern Times*, in a series of lectures delivered last October at the Pierpont Morgan Library initiating the Gilder Lehrman Institute Lectures in American History, summed it up. "Hence, though the Constitution and the Bill of Rights made no provision for a state church--quite the contrary--there was an implied an unchallenged understanding that America was a religious country, that the republic was religious not necessarily in its forms but in its bones, that it was inconceivable that it could have come into existence, or could continue and flourish, without an overriding religious sentiment pervading every nook and cranny of its society."

It is not at all clear whether the increased violence that is occurring in the United States will prompt a widespread renewal in America's Judeo-Christian heritage, and the institutions that support it, or whether instead the powers of the government will be strengthened significantly at the expense of liberty. The choice is not as obvious as it seems. America's Judeo-Christian

heritage is deeply offensive to a large, powerful and growing element in America's post-modern, increasingly secular society.

Until recently it appeared that the secular folks were winning the battle. Their beliefs have provided most of the energy for the Democrat party since the 1960s, and they are strongly in control of the nation's major universities and public education system. On the other hand, there has been an unquestionable resurgence of political power among America's religious community during the past decade.

I cannot comfortably forecast which side will dominate the political scene over the next few decades. In a very real sense, the battle of which I speak has been going on in Western societies since the Enlightenment. But I think it is worthwhile to note that the philosophical differences between these two ideologies are extremely wide, and that American society will be vastly different depending upon which one wins the battle for the hearts and minds of the majority of the nation's citizens.

A discussion of what kind of society each would produce is beyond the scope of this article. But I would like to note that history demonstrates that the long-term outlook is not particularly good for secular nations, no matter how large their police forces.

In very simple terms, a secularized population eventually becomes obsessed with owning things. In the words of Emerson, "things are in the saddle and ride mankind." "Standard of living" becomes the primary standard by which "progress," both individual and societal, is measured. The issue of "entitlements" dominates public debate, along with demands for government-sponsored wealth confiscation and redistribution. The intense attention paid to the laying up of treasure, combined with the certainty that death brings nothingness, breeds intense fear among the population. This leads to demands for government-sponsored protection against all forms of risk, both physical and economic, and this government protection comes with strings that bind liberty and weave tyranny.

Machiavelli, the quintessential advocate of strong central government stated in *Discourses*, that, "As the observance of divine institutions is the cause of the greatness of republics, so the disregard of them produces their ruin; unless it be sustained by the fear of the prince, which may temporarily supply the want of religion."

Even Nietzsche, a Godless philosopher, argued throughout his works that without a belief in God the public morality must, in the long run, finally collapse into either anarchy or tyranny--most likely into anarchy followed by tyranny.

Finally, I would refer to the works of Fustel de Coulanges, the great 19th century French historian. In one of his greatest books, *La Cite Antique*, described in my *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* as a "literary masterpiece," Fustel de Coulanges describes how during the early, prosperous days of the ancient Greek city-states their governments were closely linked to the traditional religious forms of the society; and how a growing influence of egalitarianism eventually undermined the hierarchy created by this religious influence, and eventually destroyed the importance of the family and latter the state itself, leaving society under the control of pure, naked force.

As Paul Johnson stated in his above-mentioned lecture series, "when the tide of conventional beliefs ebbs away, the incoming surge deposits strange objects, often relics of a distant past, on the shore."

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