



a report from

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Politics and Morality

(A Personal Note: Nearly 10 years ago, I delivered the following speech at the annual Felix Adler Lecture to the New York Society for Ethical Culture. My talk dealt with the turbulence of the 60s, and what Americans might expect in the 70s. For different reasons, much of those same observations still seem to apply today. This speech was first published as a [newsletter in 1971](#), and is being reprinted here in an edited version.)

Charles Dickens begins his "Tale of Two Cities" with a paradoxical statement that "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Dickens wrote of the 1770's and the French Revolution, but his description might well be applied to our own time and to our collective experience in the 1960's. For in many ways, this last decade was both the best and the worst of times. It was a time when we put a man on the moon, an event as much a symbol of our astounding technological progress as it was a result of that progress. It was the best of times in other ways, too, for the 1960's saw the culmination of social reform efforts begun more than 30 years earlier.

But it was also a decade when mobs put the torch to some of America's sick and deteriorating cities; when three of our most promising leaders fell in senseless assassinations; when we became embroiled in a hopeless war that has done incalculable damage to us and to the people of a far off land.

As a result of the worst aspects of the times, it seems to me we are on the verge of losing a typical American quality -- optimism. One of America's unique strengths and most obvious national characteristics has always been optimism. We have believed -- and our history has tended to support this view -- that America would be bigger and better and more prosperous for each generation. A man could hope and dream that his children would surpass his own achievements. We believe that when crises arose, leaders, somehow, would appear to match the times.

Yet in recent years this faith in ourselves and our leaders has been eroded. In fact, one of the most alarming things to me is the discovery that youth, to a large degree, no

longer believes in the nation's leaders. Our young have no heroes. In nearly every other time in our history, there were politicians, adventurers like Lindbergh and Admiral Byrd, great men of medicine and law, who served as models for the next generation. Contrast this with the results of a survey of college campuses a few years ago that revealed the majority of young men could think of no public man they admired and would want to emulate.

What Has Gone Wrong?

So we might stop and ask ourselves what has gone wrong and how we are going to recapture our faith in our leaders and in ourselves. Have our leaders failed us or did we fail them? Or have we failed each other?

The questions go to the heart of the issues of ethics and morality in politics. Politics, after all, is concerned with relations among men, with our obligations to ourselves and to each other. And this, of course, is what Felix Adler was concerned with and why the first Ethical Culture Society was formed 95 years ago. Adler knew that men must be concerned with each other and that, united, men could build a better world. His life tells us that man is more than an animal, that he is his brother's keeper and his brother's brother, that he has an obligation to his fellow man and to future generations, and that he rejects himself when he rejects these obligations.

It may seem presumptuous for a Congressman to talk about politics and morality. There are a lot of people who think the two concepts are mutually exclusive. But I suppose most people, when they hear the two terms linked, are inclined to think in terms of monetary morality, of kickbacks and money passed under the table, of fat contracts negotiated under a kind of most favored brother-in-law agreement. This is a traditional American attitude and there is enough evidence both in the history books and the daily newspapers to support it.

But there are other aspects of morality as it relates to politics and these are what I want to discuss here. In fact, one of our fundamental mistakes, I think, has been to confine our concern for morality in politics to narrow pecuniary terms. Too often we have been satisfied if our leaders just didn't steal from us, or at least didn't get caught at it. And too often we've gotten just what we demanded: conventionally honest men who were content to devote their public lives to the maintenance of their comfortable positions. There may have been times in our history when this was enough. But I want to suggest that this is not one of those times, and that the narrower definitions of political morality no longer are adequate.

From Confidence to Despair

Every society has had its dropouts, its hippies if you will, but ours has had to learn a new lesson. We have learned, to our bitter dismay, that the technological wonders upon which we depend for our comfort make us pitifully vulnerable at the same time. This is an age of power, but it is the kind of power that is nearly impotent in the face of fanatical minorities. Examples abound, from the hijacking of airliners to threats of urban guerilla warfare. They all point to the same lesson: that the more complex and advanced a society is, the more vulnerable it is to the onslaughts of small groups of militant, determined men. Here is a modern-day version of Dickens' paradox: the greater our power the less our security.

The danger is that the American system, with all its strengths, is a fragile thing which depends on civility, faith, trust, and the acceptance of democratic procedures by the overwhelming majority of the people. Indeed, our system has survived only because of a fragile, unwritten social compact which has bound most of us together with common principles and aspirations. It is a compact of rational men in which the majority -- the "haves" of the times -- agree to listen to the grievances of the minority and to act within a reasonable length of time on legitimate complaints. In return, the dissenters agree that while they may shout and become unpleasant, they will refrain from violence and grant sufficient time for the system to work out the necessary changes. With the tragic exception of the War Between the States, our differences and divisions have never seriously threatened to destroy the social compact itself.

The Moral Failures of Leaders

I want to suggest that our leaders have failed us in three or four major areas: most notably, in challenge, in faithfulness, and in candor. Moreover, I want to emphasize that those failures have been fundamentally moral because they involve obligations that have not been fulfilled. The obligations are implicit, if not generally acknowledged, in the assumption of positions of leadership.

First is the failure to challenge people and to arouse a sense of participation. We have accepted such challenges in the past and shared with each other the spirit of participation. But more often than not these challenges have been imposed on us from the outside -- World War II is a good example. In the absence of a Pearl Harbor or a Hitler, leaders have been loath to ask of us more than a minimum.

I believe those elected to positions of leadership have a moral obligation to exercise leadership. Timidity may at times be a virtue; if found in a leader in these times it may be a deadly sin. It is simply not enough to accept a position and then refuse to do little more than occupy it. In its starkest terms, this is an abdication of responsibility.

I might also note that it is impossible to challenge and inspire the people of a nation at the same time you are attempting to divide them. To divide is easy, for it requires only that leaders appeal to our baser instincts and exploit whatever divisions already exist. We have seen a good deal of this in recent years, and there are some people in both parties prepared to gamble that this kind of politics will be rewarded in a period of tension and confusion. Perhaps it will -- although I doubt it -- but, whatever the outcome, such men do not deserve the description leaders. Rather, they merely occupy positions of power and willingly sacrifice the moral obligations of those positions in order to retain them.

Promises Not Kept

Of course I know that it might be argued that one of the major causes of disillusionment in modern America is too much talk, too many grand programs and ringing rhetoric, followed by too little action. Well, that's true, too, for a second failure of our leaders has been the tendency to overpromise and under deliver. Since I entered Congress in 1961 we have enacted into law a remarkable number of progressive and noble measures, with great goals and promises for the future. Yet these acts of Congress have had relatively little impact in practice and in some cases, have been all but dismantled.

A mark of the 1960's was the rise in Congress of what I call "Titlemanship" -- the grand art of packaging noble new laws with noble new labels that promise all. We passed the 1968 "Safe Streets and Crime Control Act," but we refused to fund it while crime rose every year. Meantime, we are assured that more wiretapping, "no knock" raids and preventive detention will stop street crime. We had "Model Cities" legislation, an "Open Housing" law, a "War on Poverty" and all the rest. In exasperation with this game we play, I once threatened to introduce a bill labeled the "Veterans, Farmers, Widows and Orphans National Defense, Anti-Communist Rights-to-Work Act of 1966."

Public men have an obligation to deliver on their promises. When they don't, they can expect disillusionment and finally cynicism among the followers. You would think we would have learned this lesson, yet, I am afraid, there persist in public life some men who when they have coined a slogan believe they have solved a problem.

The Indispensable Link

If the news is bad the American people ought to be told. More importantly, if the task ahead is difficult and involves sacrifice, the American people deserve to know it. This is the indispensable link between the obligation to challenge our people and the obligation to deliver on our promises. Too often we have been satisfied to proclaim

great goals without honestly outlining the sacrifices necessary to attain them. Those goals can be reached, but to do so will involve changes and sacrifices which both the leaders and the people shrink from. The fundamental failure is on the part of leaders, for they are satisfied to allow the people to live with the illusion that sacrifice is not part of the goal.

We need, perhaps more than ever before, the spirit of Adlai Stevenson, who said in 1952: *"Let's tell (the American people) the truth, that there are no gains without pains, that this is the eve of great decisions, not easy decisions, like resistance when you're attacked, but a long, patient, costly struggle which alone can assure triumph over the great enemies of men: war and poverty and tyranny -- and the assaults upon human dignity which are the most grievous consequences of each."* Stevenson knew that in the long run everyone lost if we put the requirements of the next election ahead of the needs of the next generation.

There is another aspect of this failure of candor -- the failure of us politicians to tell the people the truth about our own business. There is general assumption in this country that much in politics is dishonest, but I think few people truly realize the extent to which money has corrupted the political process. This is not the same thing as the monetary morality I spoke of earlier, for much of this corruption is conventionally honest according to the rules we now follow, which makes it all the more dangerous. The failure is with those of us who have mastered the existing system and learned to live with it.

In politics -- like war -- one of the hardest things to do is to change voluntarily the rules of the game. The great barriers to campaign reform have always been this: present laws are a jungle of hypocrisy, unfairness and confusion, but it is our jungle. Incumbents as a rule have hacked their way through the foliage with some success. We know, in general, how to evade the traps, where the gold is to be found and how it must be spent. So we have a real advantage over our tenderfoot opponents who have never tried this path before.

Yet we owe the country something better than the non-law which supposedly regulates campaign spending. The present system is nothing less than a loaded gun pointed at the head of our political process. Those of us already established in politics must lead the way, will have to change to a degree the comfortable ways in which we have always done things, and some of those adjustments won't be easy. But those who had the wit to master the old system can master a new, honest system the country has long demanded and always deserved.

The Other Half

The obligations and failures of leaders I have spoken of are only half the equation, for citizens -- followers -- owe their country and their fellow man some things that they too have failed to give. It seems to me that what people often look for in their leaders are men who will not exercise leadership -- men who will give us oversimplified answers, who will justify existing ways, who will castigate our enemies, vindicate selfishness and make us comfortable with our prejudices. Some people, in the words of Sidney Harris, seek leadership which will "reconcile the irreconcilable, moralize the immoral, rationalize the irrational and promise us a society where we can continue to be as narrow and envious and shortsighted as we like without suffering the consequences."

We cannot escape individual responsibility, for we owe our fellow men something we haven't been giving them these days -- ourselves. We owe ourselves some things too, the first of which is an honest assessment of where we are heading.

More of us need to admit that we only cheat ourselves and our children when we allow -- or even demand -- that our leaders engage in the politics of illusion. The good, decent things we desire for ourselves and future generations simply are not attainable without considerable sacrifice and hard work. To pretend that this is not true, is to soothe ourselves with the drug of fantasy.

This is a fact that is only now becoming painfully clear to most of us. For the blunt truth is that we have been able to live in the style we are so accustomed to only by robbing ourselves through neglect and by using up our reserves of several vital commodities. Now the bills are coming due and we are going to have to pay them.

Survival Through Neglect

New York City -- or almost any big city in this country -- is a good example of survival through neglect. Somehow the place hangs together and functions, however badly, day to day. But the cost has been frightful in terms of the quality of life. The fact that most of us, until now, have been able to escape personal experiences with that cost makes it no less frightful.

No place could call itself a city -- a center of civilization -- if it did not provide for the education of its young people and the care of its sick and elderly. Our cities do these things, but most do them very badly. The price of doing them adequately is high indeed, and so far we have not been willing to pay it. Those of us who are members of the affluent society seek our own solutions -- perhaps in a suburb or through private institutions -- while living comfortably with the illusion that our cities really perform their functions. We will pay enough to avert the utter chaos and collapse of our urban centers, for we need them for our work and entertainment, but we will pay no more.

The poor, huddled within the cities, pay the price of our neglect. The ultimate cost of a system or institution that survives through neglect may be more than we are able to afford with even the best of intentions.

The environmental crisis is a clear case of past bills coming due. The fouled air and filthy waters of this nation are graphic evidence of both our neglect of the environment and our willingness to live high off nature's reserves rather than pay the price of our affluence. We have worshipped so long at the shrine of growth and "progress" that we have been blind to the results of our demands for more automobiles, more gadgets, more power, more comfort. We have been blessed with so much in natural resources that we have been able to get away with it. But now, the illusion that we can have this kind of "progress" free of charge also is dying.

This is what the continuing debate over national priorities is all about, but I am not convinced that we have really come to terms with the implications of that debate.

Whose Priorities?

The thrust now is to cut costs in one area and divert the savings to more pressing programs. This is a noble effort which has my full support. But I think we are still fooling ourselves if we think this will be enough.

It is the task of leadership to end our illusions and to begin to talk about these prospects. And it is our task to accept these hard truths and to reward -- not punish -- those leaders willing to speak them. On both these accounts, I am afraid our record to date is not encouraging.

In 1969, the Congress attempted to tighten up some of the more scandalous loopholes that riddle our tax laws. The result of that effort was the Tax Reform Act of 1969, which included a number of worthwhile provisions closing tax loopholes and increasing federal revenues. But much of the additional revenue the government might have received from these reforms was lost because of other provisions designed to sweeten the law enough to gain passage. We have all happily benefited from those additional benefits -- for instance, the increase in personal tax exemptions -- but that has not helped to reorder our priorities. Charles L. Schultze, who directed the new Brookings study of needs and priorities, remarked about the 1969 act:

". . . There is much brave talk about 'new priorities.' But with large tax cuts enacted, there simply will not be the revenues available to pay for these new priorities. When the chips were down on tax cuts, those who talked about priorities for pollution

control and education and an end to hunger voted for a different set of priorities -- for beer and cosmetics and whitewall tires. . . . "

Lessons of the 60's

I have spoken about politics and morality and illusion, and I want to close by suggesting that there is much to be learned from our experiences in the 1960's. Reflecting on those turbulent years brings to mind Professor C. Vann Woodward's collection of essays. *The Burden of Southern History*.

It is Woodward's contention that the unbroken string of successes which marks American history has produced in us two myths: the myth of American invincibility and the myth of American innocence. Only the South escaped enrapture in these myths, Woodward argued, for the South had experienced war on its own soil and known the bitter taste of defeat, occupation, humiliation, poverty and the legacy of slavery. Such an historical experience is not conducive to visions of either invincibility or innocence.

The addition of the last ten years to American history has done much to shatter those two myths and extend the geography of Woodward's burden. Surely the myth of invincibility died somewhere in the jungles of Vietnam. And surely the discovery of blatant racism outside the South, or the awakening of more Americans to the real story of the white man's relationship to the Indians, has all but ended our illusion of innocence. The question as we enter the 80's is how will we react to the loss of these cherished myths.

One more recourse is to retreat into despair and angry frustration. I mentioned at the outset that we are losing our traditional optimism. This is, perhaps, the price we pay for the sudden realization that we are not, after all, either invincible or totally innocent.

It will be the moral challenge of political leadership in the years ahead to prevent this from happening. As I have tried to indicate that task will not be an easy one, for either our leaders or ourselves. We can make the task both possible and rewarding if we will accept the costs and demand true leadership from our public men and institutions. We can begin by recognizing, as Adler recognized, that in the final analysis we are responsible ourselves. Mark Twain gave leaders of all generations some sound counsel: "Do what is right. You'll please some people and astonish the rest." And Edward Everett Hale uttered a philosophy which all Americans of the 1980's ought to adopt:

"I am only one . . . but I am one . . . I cannot do everything, but I can do something . . . what I can do I ought to do . . . and what I ought to do by the grace of God I will do."

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