

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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Farewell to the Culture Wars?

A Survey of Recent Articles

With the end of President Clinton's impeachment trial in February, it was the American people's turn to have their psyche and values probed. Commentators across the spectrum tackled the question of what the events of the preceding year revealed about the nation's morality. The culture wars, it suddenly seemed to many on both the right and the left, just might be over. Not everyone greeted this development with joy. Still, what was striking about the premillennial bout of self-scrutiny was how nonmillennarian the mood in general seemed to be.

"America the O.K." was the title of an early assessment by senior editor Gregg Easterbrook in the *New Republic* (Jan. 4 & 11). The article was subtitled "Why Life in the U.S. Has Never Been Better," and it proved to be only the first of many upbeat verdicts. As Easterbrook noted, he was bucking a long tide of pessimism among pundits and politicians of all stripes. The culture wars, with their warnings about moral decline and about moralistic oppression, have been good for both left and right agendas. But according to Easterbrook, many signs point to social and moral improvement on a significant scale (although poverty persists, and the international scene is rife with problems). He canvassed the good news: less crime, a notable decline in "drink, drugs, and fooling around." Economically, Americans have never been better off, and "the family-breakup wave may have crested." (A few years ago, half of all marriages were expected to end in divorce; now, only 40 percent are.) Easterbrook emphasized that there is no single sweeping explanation for all the upturns, but there is a modest conclusion to be drawn: "that intractable or 'impossible' dilemmas can be solved. Our efforts matter."

A month later, David Whitman, a senior

writer at *U.S. News & World Report*, joined Easterbrook in making optimism about America's soul a real trend, not the "taboo subject for intellectual debate" of old. In the *New Republic* (Feb. 22, 1999), he augmented Easterbrook's evidence that Americans act less, not more, immorally than they did 25 years ago. They give more money to charity. More adults and teens belong to churches and synagogues. Cheating has not become ubiquitous. Political corruption is waning. Legal segregation has ended. Sexual discrimination has vastly decreased. So why are people so convinced that things are grim in general? Because there is an "optimism gap" (the title of Whitman's recent book)—an "I'm O.K., they're not" syndrome at work. People, while personally optimistic, see decline all around them. It is time, Whitman proposed, that Americans extend their generous opinion of their own morals to their neighbors.

Cultural sanguinity has come a little less readily to the media on the right end of the spectrum. For if the culture wars are over—as they, too, are ready to admit—the terms of the peace, as the battle over Clinton's fate revealed, sit less well with conservatives. Paul Weyrich, head of the Free Congress Foundation, waxed the most apocalyptic in February. "If there really were a moral majority out there, Bill Clinton would have been driven out of office months ago," he declared, concluding that "we probably have lost the culture war" to politically correct liberals. "The culture we are living in becomes an ever-wider sewer. In truth, I think we are caught up in a cultural collapse of historic proportions, a collapse so great that it simply overwhelms politics."

Weyrich's lament had precedents, in William Bennett's sermonic warnings about the

death of outrage in his book by that title about the Clinton scandal, and in the disillusioned dismay expressed by William Kristol, editor of the conservative *Weekly Standard*. How could ordinary citizens have so failed to live up to the virtuous, traditionalist reputations ascribed to them by their champions on the right? As Alan Wolfe (author of *One Nation, After All*, a study of middle-class morality) observed in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* (Feb. 22, 1999), it had been a neoconservative tenet that only the “new class” of elite liberals were supposed to be decadently relativistic about “values.” Now, according to the polls, the populace at large was not only forgiving of their president’s private sins but content with his public leadership and disinclined to link the two. As Gertrude Himmelfarb, professor emerita at the City University of New York, wrote in an essay on the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page (Feb. 4, 1999), “conservatives used to think that ‘the people’ are ‘sound,’ that only occasionally are they (or more often their children) led astray by the ‘elites’ in the media and in academia. That confidence has now eroded.”

Meanwhile, however, in Kristol’s own pages America’s soul was getting higher marks. In “Good & Plenty: Morality in an Age of Prosperity” (Feb. 1, 1999), senior editor David Brooks rejected the diagnoses of “our heroes on the right, to the effect that America is in cultural decline . . . corroded by easygoing nihilism . . . depraved by radical egalitarianism.” A visit to Plainfield, Connecticut—a town dependent on gambling for its livelihood, but up in arms about the arrival of a striptease club and porn shop—led him to a defense of America’s unmoralizing, piecemeal, pragmatic brand of decency. “Moral standards don’t necessarily rise and fall all at once, in great onslaughts of virtue or vice,” and plenty of “social indicators . . . are moving in the right direction: abortion rates are declining, crime is down, teenage sexual activity is down, divorce rates are dropping.” The new language of virtue is more medical than judgmental: “health codes instead of moral codes” are our arbiters of behavior. But this “lower-case morality,” if somewhat superficial, is also peaceful, and it is perfectly responsible. And it is not countercultural at all. On the contrary, Brooks pointed out, the essence of the 1960s spirit was utopian, and this morality is modest, utilitarian, and

bourgeois. “Well, my fellow right-wingers, you wanted bourgeois values? You got ‘em.”

Or at least they are making a comeback. “Society has begun a process of ‘remoralizing’ itself and walking back from the cultural abyss it faced,” Francis Fukuyama, professor of public policy at George Mason University and the author of the forthcoming *Great Disruption*, announced in an essay on the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page (Feb. 11, 1999). Fukuyama accepted the conservative diagnosis that the 1960s marked a moral downturn, as evidenced by lots of “indicators of social dysfunction, including crime, welfare dependency, divorce, illegitimacy and drug use.” But he proposed to interpret it “as the product of something other than a sudden, unexplainable loss of values.” Moral norms did change, most importantly in the realm of sex and the family, but they did so in response to radically improved birth control and a market demand for female labor. “Since changes in moral norms were heavily influenced by broad technological and economic forces, some values are very unlikely to return to their old form.” Which still leaves plenty of room for moral re-norming, and on terms that show how much liberals have learned from conservatives, Fukuyama insisted. “Family values,” after all, is far from a fundamentalist rallying cry these days.

But that rallying cry, Charles Murray noted on the *Journal’s* editorial page (Feb. 2 1999), seems not to be having much effect where, arguably, it most urgently needs to be heard, among the underclass. The number of Americans who “demonstrate chronic criminality” is larger than ever. Among young black men not in school, the proportion who have dropped out of the work force is rising, and now stands at 23 percent. The illegitimacy rate may be declining, but the illegitimacy ratio—the percentage of babies born to unmarried women—rose during the 1990s; it stands at 67 percent among blacks, and 32 percent for the nation as a whole.

Murray, like Himmelfarb, refused to join the chorus of cheerfulness. But where he lamented the bottom minority that is missing out on the national regeneration, she celebrated “the minority that resists the dominant culture, that abides . . . by traditional values and that is unembarrassed by the language of morality.” In fact, to judge by the media outpouring, that language is the lingua franca of the day.