

# THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

*A commentary on domestic issues from the Ethics and Public Policy Center*

FALL 1992

NUMBER 4

## CLINTON DO'S AND DON'TS

IN ANCIENT ROME, when a victorious general celebrated a triumphal procession, a priest rode in the chariot with him whispering in his ear, "Remember, you are not a god!" Human nature has, at last report, not changed much in the past two thousand years. As President-elect Bill Clinton takes his triumphal bus trip from Monticello to the District of Columbia in January, he would be well served by the people around him if they reminded him about the dangers of hubris in the White House. Clinton let power go to his head during his first term as governor of Arkansas, trying to impose elite liberal goals on an unwilling populace. The Arkansas voters responded by immediately returning him to private life for a while. Though he seems to have learned a lesson from that defeat, he will face political and personal temptations in Washington that are unequaled in any other seat of power. The principal challenge for the new president is to establish a new vision for the country while keeping a clear head about the nature and limits of what government—any government—can or ought to do.

Clinton has earned his triumph by successfully creating modest hopes for the future in an election in which Bush's "vision thing" finally died its natural death. The lesson is clear; no one running for president in the future should expect to win without a sense of what the United States is and could be. Ronald Reagan, for all his faults, never lost his grip on that living truth. It was the steady secret of his success. In the end the Bush administration's vaunted "New Paradigm" was revealed to be "No Paradigm." The American people, tired of the Bush moral bankruptcy, returned a vote of no confidence. But Clinton and the rest of us should not be deluded about the nature of the vote. Clinton has no mandate. Ameri-

cans expect from Clinton some pragmatic approaches to economic problems. They also seem to be searching, however, for a new national purpose, a vision beyond the national malaise that descended upon us with the end of the Cold War.

### *Ethics and the "New Covenant"*

As Aristotle observed long ago, politics is a branch of ethics, but a branch with some specific characteristics. In politics we do not try to turn every moral principle into a law. Rather we seek to order public life so that civic amity may emerge from the chaos of individual interests. Where politics fails to insure that large framework of public morality, discrete political successes will not long stand. In a speech he gave at Notre Dame last fall, Bill Clinton recognized as much by observing:

All across this country, we are in quieter crisis. Yes, it is a crisis of the economy. Yes, it is a crisis of our educational system. Yes, it is a crisis of our environment. But, most of all, it is a crisis of spirituality and community—a crisis that calls upon each of us to remember, and to act upon, our obligations to each other.

In language unusual for Democratic candidates in recent elections, he said: "When I think of how I want to change America during the next four years, I want most of all to restore the link between rights and responsibilities, opportunities and obligations; the social contract that defines what we owe to one another, to our communities, and to our country."

ANOTHER GORE	5
FAMILY VALUES	6
HOMOPHOBIA?	7
GIFTED GREEKS	8

INSIDE

The "New Covenant" Clinton announced in his convention acceptance speech is certainly more approachable than the "New Paradigm." It also has the advantage of sounding like something from the heart of the American experience rather than from the brain of a domestic-policy adviser. But if the New Covenant is to mean anything, Clinton must reach out to new constituencies by truly exploring the moderate positions he claims for himself. (The term "New Covenant" itself, however, betrays traces of both manipulation and overreaching in its scriptural pretensions. It is based, in part, on a misconstrual of the New Testament passage about what "eyes have not seen nor our ears heard" to refer to "what *we* can build." In the original, God got top billing.) After all, the 1992 election was not so much a rejection of conservatism, as many liberal pundits have claimed, as it was a confirmation that even Democrats had to lower the liberal banners to make a credible run for the presidency. Clinton has shown that he understands the public's wish for a restoration of community, but not by way of the usual Democratic nostrums and promiscuous rights-talk. In the acceptance speech Clinton told his fellow Democrats,

It's time for us to realize that we've got some changing to do, too. There is not a program in government for every problem. And if we want to use government to help people, we've got to make it work again.

The slight non-sequitur between the last two sentences here reflects some ambiguities in Clinton's vision.

The New Covenant exists somewhat uneasily with the old temptations of the Democrats: "So I say, George Bush, if you won't use your power to help America, step aside. I will." Clinton desires both a more modest set of expectations from government and an expanded role for government. His position on college aid is a case in point. First, Clinton advocates that government money be made available to anyone who wants to go to college. Students would be required to repay the loans, of course, but they would also have the option of joining a national service program: "Just think of it: millions of energetic young men and women, serving their country by policing the streets, or teaching children, or caring for the sick, or working with the elderly or people with disabilities, or helping young people to stay off drugs and out of gangs." Concealed beneath this noble vision are the extensive governmental mechanisms and bureaucracy that would have to administer such a program. Leaving aside questions about the willingness of many new college graduates to pay the community back by becoming policemen or teachers or firemen, Clinton reveals here the seem-

ingly chronic Democratic itch for federal "programs."

Perhaps it would be better to say that Clinton is politically shrewd enough to propose only new programs that have a basically conservative feel. Not daring to use the old Democratic language about public projects, Clinton speaks instead of "investment" in America. Though some of his aims are sound, such as modernizing transportation and making computerized information networks universally available, it is not at all evident that they are best accomplished by the federal government and in the ways conceptualized by Robert Reich of Harvard. For years, Reich has been cooking up data to scare us into thinking we need government "investment" to keep from falling behind Japan. But Japan's population—homogeneous, xenophobic, accustomed to authoritarian structures—is far different than ours. Imitating Japanese approaches in the very different environment of the United States is likely to produce unexpected results.

Some old liberal programs came under heavy fire in the convention address. One of the things Clinton claims the New Covenant is about could have come straight out of a speech from the Reagan years:

An America where we end welfare as we know it. We will say to those on welfare: you will have and you deserve the opportunity through training and education, through child care and medical coverage, to liberate yourself. But then, when you can, you must work, because welfare should be a second chance, not a way of life.

This is a bracing, if unrealistic, aspiration—as well as proof positive that Bill Clinton's communitarian advisers have accepted a good portion of the conservative critique of how welfare affects the character of the people. A careful teasing out of the statement's implications, however, might suggest that we are in for some further welfare programs under the guise of "interim" measures. It remains to be seen what the Clinton administration makes concretely of this not wholly bad vision for the future.

Clinton has still other liberal Democratic baggage to re-examine. A president who, despite being popularly elected, had high negative ratings and received only 43 per cent of the popular vote, should seek out some new constituencies, at least new for Democrats, if he hopes to win re-election four years from now. Yet across a wide spectrum of issues he may have already strapped himself into a straitjacket that would take a magician to escape. Without question, changing direction in the Democratic party will take courage and a willingness to stand up to some special interests. But a New Covenant, to be truly



new, must unite parts of society formerly left out of the Democratic party's consideration.

### *Abortion Revisited*

The most divisive moral issue in the nation, of course, is abortion. In fact, it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that how America eventually settles the abortion question will determine what kind of nation America will become. Will we be a people who are willingly callous about human life in order to avoid inconvenience, or will we, recognizing the heroic virtues it may require from some women, choose solidarity with the unborn even at the expense of our own ease? The vast majority of Americans already oppose the vast majority of abortions now being performed. All but a relatively small portion of voters condemn terminating pregnancies for convenience, as a last-resort form of contraception, or for sex selection or other frivolous reasons (categories that account for over 90 per cent of current abortions). The media have deliberately obscured this point by reporting that only about a quarter of the populace wants to ban abortion altogether. Though this is true, it fails to disaggregate some important factors. Rape, incest, and threats to the life of the mother are the hard cases that account for the high numbers who do not favor absolute prohibitions.

So many people are troubled by the blithe acceptance of abortion under many other circumstances that Clinton will not be able to soothe the national conscience with ritual invocations of "a woman's right to choose." Just a few years ago, both Clinton and Al Gore showed strong signs of being pro-life. But in his acceptance speech, Clinton trotted out the old split-the-difference formula that he is pro-choice, not pro-abortion. His weak quibble suggests that he correctly senses more is involved in abortion than an unqualified right to choose.

Anyone with a clear head knows that in moral issues the real question is not whether we have choices, but what is being chosen. Most aborted fetuses have beating hearts and elementary brain-wave activity. Cutting short that developing life is not simply a medical procedure like removing a bothersome wart. Clinton himself, returning to the uneasiness he and Gore used to express about abortion, seems to have recognized as much when he said in the waning days of the campaign that he would encourage adoption as an alternative and seek to make abortion "as rare as possible." This position is based on a sound moral insight, one that he and many Democrats ought to explore further. Why do we think that adoption might be a better solution to problem pregnancies than is abortion? Do we feel somehow that abortion is a coarse, perhaps covertly violent, re-

sponse to a human dilemma? Is there something more involved than mere intrusion on the freedom of women?

Clinton has an opportunity here to enrich our social ethic by making us think, as he suggested at Notre Dame, about responsibilities as well as rights. His appointments to the judiciary could help establish a new sense of rights and responsibilities across a wide spectrum of issues, including abortion. But Clinton may have thrown away his opportunities here by promising to make pro-choice positions a litmus test for appointments to the Supreme Court. We are not likely to see the term "litmus test" in media coverage of future appointees, since the metaphor was coined to discredit pro-life candidates (Robert Bork and others were not criticized because they had passed, say, an administration litmus test on interstate commerce). Yet we now have a president-elect who has announced a litmus test in advance. The damage this does to our public discourse and to the selection of Supreme Court justices will likely bear some sour fruit quite soon.

### *Public-School Monopolies*

Education presents the president-elect with some other profound and central questions of public ethics. In what seemed almost a slip in his acceptance speech, Clinton spoke of "a government that offers more empowerment and less entitlement, more choices for young people in the schools they attend, in the public schools they attend." The stumble here may reflect the fact that in his education stance against choice outside public schools, Clinton is on slippery ground—and knows it. A recent Gallup poll found over 70 per cent of the nation endorses the idea of school choice, up from 50 per cent a year ago; 88 per cent of black parents would welcome vouchers usable at both public and private schools.

Clinton gained the support of the National Education Association because, like other Democrats, he has at least passively accepted the NEA's line that the interests of the nation's largest teachers' union are identical to the good of American education. This is a doubtful proposition, to say the least. Over the last decade, teachers salaries, as well as overall expenditures on education, have risen well above the inflation rate. Our educational crisis is not, then, primarily a matter of money but a matter of vision and will. In the modern world the close connection between educational achievement, on the one hand, and economic and social regeneration, on the other, makes reform of education a crucial moral task for the Clinton administration. Yet he seems determined to permit the National Education Association to continue along its not-so-merry way.





In the past, public schools performed an indisputable public service that may have justified mandatory tax support. Today parents who do not like what is going on in their local school districts—a growing contingent to judge by the popularity of magnet schools and choice programs where they have been created—are generally subjected to a double compulsion. First, they are required to support schools that not only fail to benefit but may actually harm the intellectual and moral development of students. Second, they are penalized for choosing alternatives they believe will make their children better and more productive members of society.

The public-school system is the closest thing we have to an established church in the United States. When it concentrated on basic instruction, that establishment was not very controversial. But education bureaucrats have allowed academic standards to slip while introducing into the schools many divisive social issues—condoms, sex education, homosexual and lesbian lifestyles, and the bogus social engineering of multiculturalism. It is no wonder, then, that many parents react as if their children are being required to attend the services of an eccentric cult in classrooms from which traditional prayer, religion, and morals have been banished. Moral vision and leadership in education demand that the president seek to make schools primarily places of teaching and learning again. And if Clinton really values diversity, he can certainly find ways to allow those who wish to attend single-sex, denominational, or other particular schools to do so without penalty and without threatening good public schools doing their proper tasks.

### *Boundaries of Pluralism*

Clinton has sincerely labored for racial harmony and respect for differences in this country while resisting the Democrats' usual kowtowing to figures like Jesse Jackson. His rejection of Sister Souljah's hate speech last spring showed a spirit of authentic, as opposed to politically correct, desire for harmony among all groups. The United States needs more such efforts at reconciliation to overcome the problems that persist in our society. But Clinton should also make some further moral distinctions. Most Americans are perfectly willing to seek better relations among all ethnic and racial groups; they hope to see women more equitably treated in the society; and they desire a rejuvenation of our cities and a broader sense of authentic, plural community that also respects the basic principles on which our nation is founded. They are not prepared, however, to support ideological and moral crusades based on false analogies. Discrimination against homosexuals,

for instance, is something most Americans deplore. But opposition to discrimination and the public affirmation of homosexual lifestyles are two distinct stances.

Clinton has promised to force the military to accept professed homosexuals. This seems to reflect a curious absence of self-knowledge in a man whose position as commander in chief is already wobbly owing to his lies and half-truths about his Vietnam draft record. Probably several of the usual suspects around the world are already planning ways to test Clinton's grip on the U.S. military in the near future. Clinton cannot afford further erosion of his own authority among military leaders before he has proven himself, and the list of distinguished officers opposed to Clinton's policy is long. It includes both Colin Powell, a Bush appointee, and Admiral Krogh, one of Clinton's own supporters. If Clinton follows through on his pledge, he might well provoke a massive reaction in the military itself and he will be ignoring, as he did in his arrogant first term as governor of Arkansas, the moral intuitions of the American people.

Homosexuals, despite the steady drumbeat of claims in the media, are not simply another minority like blacks, Hispanics, or Asians. While the AIDS crisis may make protection of homosexuals from unfair discrimination all the more pressing, it should not be used as an excuse for special treatment of homosexuals and lesbians. The organization now most actively insisting on acceptance of gays by the military is called the Gay, Lesbian, and Bi-sexual Veterans Association. Will the military also be asked to affirm bisexuality? How about polygamy? Once we set off down this slope, will the government have the authority to restrict genders of multiple partners? Will the Clinton administration force the rest of the society, too, not only to tolerate but to affirm through government institutions practices and lifestyles deeply at odds with the national ethos? And punish those who disagree? (See "Homophobia," page seven this issue.)

The referendum passed by voters in Colorado, which prohibits the state from enacting special legislation to ensure gay rights, may be only the first sign of a serious backlash if the federal government tries to force people to accept moral positions at odds with their beliefs. Claims by Democrats during the campaign notwithstanding, two-thirds of Americans want the federal government to promote traditional family values, not merely out of moral reasons, but because those values make a difference to our social, economic, and political health. (President Clinton may want, accordingly, to reconsider giving free reign to the National Endowment for the Arts. In a time of no



little economic austerity, taxpayers may resent allowing the endowment to continue down the Mapplethorpe-Serrano path of the past.) Promotion of traditional values need not mean narrow intolerance, but activists should limit themselves to seeking tolerance rather than official endorsement of alternative lifestyles.

### *The Constitutional Vision*

Perhaps the overarching public moral principle for a Clinton administration to keep in mind, however, is the often-forgotten truth (sometimes forgotten even by our high courts) that we live in a constitutional republic. The whole purpose of a written constitution is not to provide "emanations and penumbras" for judges and legislators who want to use the power of the state to enact their own agendas. Rather, a constitution establishes structures and defines boundaries for governing. The Constitution is to the United States roughly what the Bible is to Christianity and Judaism. Both documents authoritatively create specific realms of human freedom and responsibility within a larger basic understanding of human nature and human community. However much some modern scholars and activists may wish to explain away the clear constraints embodied in the Constitution and in Scripture, these two foundational texts of our American experiment cannot be subjected to redefinition or to political passions without peril to liberty, order, and true civic amity. Both texts continue to whisper in the ear of even those who have ascended to the most powerful political positions on earth the useful lesson, "Remember, you are not a god."

Sources: Clinton at the University of Notre Dame, 11 September 1992; Bill Clinton and Al Gore, *Putting People First* (New York: Times Books, 1992); James MacGuire, "The Carnegie Assault on School Choice," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 November 1992.



## THE OTHER GORE

WELL. GORE VIDAL, the grand old . . . what shall we call him . . . man of American letters has re-entered the thicket of current politics, culture, and religion. While the media have been busy determining exactly how radical are the environmental views of Democratic Vice President-elect Al Gore, Vidal (that other and very-dangerous-to-forget Gore) has slipped all sorts of spiritual carcinogens in through the back door of public discourse with two sizzling volumes—*Screening History*, a series of autobiographical essays delivered at Harvard, and *Live from Golgotha*, a blas-

phemous novel about the origins of Christianity and modern Christian hucksters. Vidal admits in one section of the autobiography that "my seventh or so cousin, Albert Gore, stayed away [from a recent extended family reunion] on my account." Al may not be altogether sober when it comes to the ozone layer, but he has a sound nose for socially noxious materials.

For when allowance has been made for the sheer brilliance of Gore Vidal and all his works and pomps, the man and his words are decidedly wicked. Not wickedly funny or wickedly satirical. Wicked. A writer for *Newsweek*, piously following the current intellectual cant, called *Golgotha* "bracingly blasphemous. Vidal's most outrageous novel is a systematic subversion of every known value—except, of course, intelligence, wit, and imagination." The second half of this sentence is a code intended to validate the first half. This code is often invoked about works of art in contemporary America. But the intellectual's admiration of intelligence, wit, and imagination cannot trump wicked ends. Stalin had intelligence and wit, of a sort; Pol Pot, a singular imagination. The good in a good person is a mystery, but whatever the essence of good may be, it finds no home in Gore Vidal.

Because we idolize intelligence, however, all Vidal's faults are forgiven or soft-pedaled. Father Andrew Greeley can find it in his soul only to mumble qualifications about "if you like blasphemy" in his *Washington Post Book World* review of *Golgotha*, lest we make the vulgar error of mistaking him for an opponent of slandering God in novels. The tough investigative interviewer of *Time* magazine assented silently as Vidal asserted, "Christianity is such a silly religion," and opined prior to November 3 that Bush would lose the election "largely because of his stand on abortion." Only the age of AIDS moves the journalist to comment on any qualms readers of *Golgotha* might have; "it may be that it is no longer easy to laugh at scenes in which Nero rapes Timothy ('Tighten those beautiful little buns') or to laugh off lewd goings-on along the missionary trail." Walter Goodman of the *New York Times*, who labors under the misimpression that the Vatican still has a list of "banned" books, and other self-appointed journalistic defenders of the public morals have warned that this book should not be censored—as if that were a serious possibility anywhere outside Iran. By acquiescing in Gore Vidal's aging and bitter fulminations against God and America, the media make him appear a rare and fragile resource expressing unusual truths.

Vidal's sort of bile, of course, is hardly a scarce commodity in journalistic and intellectual circles; his





work is simply a more intelligent and energetic expression of less original, grimmer intellectual fare. He has, however, championed certain quirky views. For several decades he has posed as a populist and as a defender of the old republic against the plutocrats and imperialists by which we are now, he believes, ruled. As a result, he has become the darling of various eccentrics across the political spectrum who find in him unusually sharp weapons for attacking their own contemporary bugbears.

Yet Vidal's commitment to these two positions is, to say the least, ambivalent. "Half the American people never read a newspaper," he remarks. "Half never vote for president—the same half?" Is this populism? And what populist has ever been a name-dropper like Vidal? The name-dropping is oblique and artful ("Years later he told me that 'When I was Prince of Wales . . .'", a postmodern meta-chic that makes the merely chic merely passé. In Vidal's account of his life, he knew everybody and saw everything; but no one was worth knowing and nothing was worth seeing.

Furthermore, what self-styled defender of the republic has done more to discredit the simple republican virtues? Cincinnatus or Scipio, to say nothing of Washington or Madison, would have been hard put to recognize the noble republican spirit in *Myra Breckinridge* or the hardy peasant-farmer piety toward the gods and the land in *Julian*. Yet journalists and book reviewers fawn over this "Maverick Lion in Winter," who watches U.S. decline from his self-imposed exile in Italy, as if he were the repressed conscience of his country. And in the film *Bob Roberts*, Tim Robbins has cast Vidal as a wise old liberal senator, with an implausibility hard to swallow even by Hollywood's standards.

Admittedly, Vidal also skewers in passing some deserving targets:

—"The [*New York Times*] interviewer's opening words to me were, 'You hate the American people, don't you?' I said, 'No, I hate the *New York Times* and the two are not the same.'"

—"I should like for us to abandon our entire educational system as it is now constituted. *Deliberately* abandon, that is; rather than let it vanish, as it is doing through attrition."

—"Certainly, no reality intrudes on our presidential elections. They are simply fast-moving fictions."

—"If I were a would-be foreign conqueror of the United States, my cry to my hordes would be: Hollywood Delenda Est."

But these occasional truths remind the reader more of the old saw about how many times a day a stopped clock is right (Vidal was president of America

First at Exeter) than of the musings of a wise and inspired oracle.

In *Screening History* Vidal, the "third-generation atheist," quotes his grandfather Senator Thomas Pryor Gore, "If there was any race other than the human race, I'd go join it." Though it is risky to suppose that a man who so thoroughly exposes the nakedness of his fathers (and mother), and deconstructs every other member of his family, agrees with anything any one of them ever said, Gore Vidal does appear to heed this particular ancestral voice. Unlike his forefathers, however, Vidal's situation seems less problematic: he seems never completely to have joined the human race in the first place.

Sources: Gore Vidal, *Live from Golgotha* and *Screening History*; "Maverick Lion in Winter," *Time*, 28 September 1992.



## FAMILY VALUES

OKAY, SO IT'S not the best way to put it, and its overuse at the Republican Convention gave it an unreal aura. Not long ago, people who understood that we are sliding into a black hole of relativism and self-centeredness also understood that "values" are the problem, not the solution. Value-talk is yet one more attempt to buy the birthright of old morals and character on the cheap, without having to pay the price of saying some things are good, others evil. Behind the unctuous facade, values prolong the life of the now thoroughly discredited concept that moral principles are mere preferences. You are a rigorous person and have ten "values"; I am more easygoing and only have four, which in addition I hold lightly. Neither of us can be judged by any other standard; we each have chosen our values.

Coupling the term "family" to this slippery surrogate for ethics could only cause additional woes. Critics were quick to point out that the variety of families made the term ambiguous, perhaps even contrary to what its proponents wished, and they have a point. The term family was denatured long ago. During the late 1970s the Carter administration tried to run a White House "Conference on the Family" that, under pressure from the usual suspects, was quickly renamed "Conference on Families." (Families, if you did not already know, come in many shapes.) The final definition of the family at that fiasco was so broad that Alan Carlson, if memory serves, characterized it as applying equally to parents and children or to two winos sharing a boxcar.

And yet "family values" will, for the moment,





have to do. Despite its drawbacks, the term drew so much hellfire that there must be some white magic in it. Of course liberal politicians and media gurus professed themselves superior to this instance of intolerance. After the convention even some Republicans, wishing to steer clear of controversy, got nervous about the whole idea. And the usually temperate Jonathan Yardley was stung into saying in the *Washington Post* that the issue appealed only "to our fear of and hostility toward that which is different, unknown, or unconventional."

This last charge is a thoughtless cliché and simply false. What most people fear in the breakdown of the family is not at all unknown. Nor is it different or unconventional in the sense Yardley means. Though "family values" have to cover a wide terrain in contemporary America, they still stake out the contours of meaning and behavior essential to the continued existence of the nation. Murphy Brown is a wealthy exception who can indulge herself, but, as Dan Quayle was right to point out, no culture can afford to indulge too many imitators of Murphy Brown.

The careless and privileged writers, producers, and actors of that television series will not be around to see the concrete consequences of further loosening the bonds between children and their fathers. The slow poisoning of the culture seems far removed from the poor unmarried mothers who really pay the price of family breakdown. But they are, in part, victims of the cultural elite—even if no one cultural factor entirely accounts for their plight. And only something like a return to "family values" across the nation is likely to keep that elite from setting its own glamorous, bad example to people with few powerful good examples in their lives.



## FEAR AND HOMOPHOBIA

FOR SOME TIME homosexuals in the United States have waged a two-track campaign to legitimize same-sex relationships. First, they have advocated replacing terms that imply natural norms, and the moral judgments partly based on them, with neutral rhetoric about preferences and lifestyles. This tactic has been highly successful. While in Euclidean geometry some basic truths are established "by inspection," moreover, all references to inspection of some simple facts of human anatomy have been effectively eliminated from public discussions of homosexuality. And woe to the politician who ignores this prohibition. Even the AIDS epidemic—which, like smoking, has revealed that Mother Nature does not seem to like

certain things coming in contact with one another—has not yet noticeably rolled back these gay rhetorical achievements.

And now a second, more virulent front has been opened in the language battle. People who resist the definition of homosexuality as a mere preference and lifestyle are increasingly labeled "homophobic." No longer merely the polemical feint of activists, this term threatens to enter medical literature with a vengeance. Dr. Richard A. Isay, the chairman of the American Psychiatric Association's committee on gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues, wrote recently that professional associations in the United States have dropped homosexuality from their list of diseases and the World Health Organization will remove it from a similar listing next year, but "meanwhile consensus grows among mental health professionals that homophobia, the irrational fear and hatred of homosexuals, is a psychological abnormality that interferes with the judgment and reliability of those afflicted." If this "consensus" holds, government, industry, the military, and the academy may soon be required to treat homophobes with the suspicion and prejudice once shown to, and now deplored by, homosexuals.

Had the concept of homophobia been invented by a freshman in introductory philosophy, it would not have propelled him to the top of his class. It means too little and claims to explain too much. To begin with, other phobias are built on real, if exaggerated, fears. An acrophobe may inordinately fear falling from a height, but his phobia accurately tells him that falling, under some circumstances, is indeed a danger. The denouncers of homophobia presumably do not wish to suggest that some fear of homosexuals is legitimate but has just gotten blown out of proportion.

Furthermore, one question inevitably arises: how much of the opposition to easy acceptance of homosexuality can be traced to homophobia? Some anti-homosexual zealots may exhibit an irrational passion. But how much of the resistance comes from parents, teachers, clergy, and doctors who, while sympathizing with the troubles of homosexual persons, are simply unwilling to have homosexuality treated as if it raises no moral or social questions? Hispanic and African-American parents in New York recently demonstrated against plans by the New York Board of Education to portray homosexual "families" as favorably as others. Far from a phobia, this seemed like a spirited resistance to state-imposed morality by a largely powerless and voiceless group. True, not imagined or irrational, fear that their own morals and very children would be assaulted seems to have energized this group.





At a demonstration in Washington earlier this year, ACT-UP members chanted, "We're here, we're queer, and we want your children." Prestigious members of this country's psychiatric establishment did not stand up at the time to warn that obsessive homophilia "is a psychological abnormality that interferes with the judgment and reliability of those afflicted." The introduction of the term homophobia as a way to discount all those who oppose the progressive agenda on homosexuality is a ruse—a particularly dishonest one by the medical establishment—to mask the moral and social debate that is the right of a free people in a free country exempt, at least until now, from the tyranny of political psychiatry.



## GREEKS BEARING GIFTS

THANKS TO THE courage of Greece's Prime Minister Constantine Mitsotakis and a couple of American museum curators, thirty-four of the most striking Greek sculptures from the classical period are currently being exhibited in the United States under the title "The Greek Miracle." At first sight, it may seem odd that arranging an art exhibit would require the virtue of courage (a concept first elaborated by those same classical Greeks). But to display classical art in the United States today does take courage.

On his side, the Greek prime minister had to contend with a people who fear shipment of their precious patrimony abroad. According to one report, Greeks have sometimes thrown their bodies on packing crates to avoid exposing priceless art works to potential damage or loss. Because Greece has been invaded and pillaged by a variety of foreigners over the centuries, willing shipment of remaining treasures has historical echoes. Greek officials must, consequently, make elaborate videotaped records of shipment, safe arrival, and safe return to keep the Greek people reasonably calm.

On the American side of the exchange, a far different set of passions has arisen that tells us a great deal about the current state of the nation—or at least about its cultural elites. In a multicultural age, it might seem natural to display works from the rich and very different culture we call classical Greece. Yet the classical world is not what most multiculturalists have in mind when they advocate openness to other lands and peoples. If truth be told, many students today probably have a better sense of African, Hispanic, and Asian cultural artifacts than they do of the civilization of ancient Greece, one of the progenitors of our own civilization. And no wonder. For some people, trying to make ancient Greek art better known is the moral equivalent of touting dead, white, European males.

An interviewer for *U.S. News & World Report*, a generally sober journal, actually asked J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, "Is this art relevant in a multicultural society?" Having just retired from his post, Brown perhaps felt freer to be candid than he did during a number of politically correct shows (including the recent "Circa 1492" exhibit, which he was quick to remove from potential controversies by insisting that it was "not about a man called Christopher Columbus: his name does not even appear in the title"):

It would be a great loss to this country if everyone just took whatever piece of world culture they felt they could identify with most closely and abjured everything else. We'd then be babbling in all of these languages and be at each other's throats. And that doesn't seem to me what civilization is all about.

After this indiscretion, J. Carter Brown may no longer appear on Bill Clinton's short list for the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Sources: *U.S. News & World Report*, 30 November 1991; J. Carter Brown, "Foreword," *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*.

*Robert Royal*



THE AMERICAN CHARACTER (ISSN 1059-4515), Robert Royal, editor, Gretchen Baudhuin, associate editor, is published four times a year by the Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1015 Fifteenth Street N.W., Suite 900, Washington, D.C. 20005, telephone (202) 682-1200, facsimile (202) 408-0632.

# THE AMERICAN CHARACTER