THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

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

FALL 1993 NUMBER 6

REINVENTING THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

WHAT KEEPS THE United States united in 1993? In many ways this is a silly question. America is the most powerful nation on earth, one of the wealthiest, and by any significant measure the most successful democracy in all of human history. Millions of people around the world would gladly come here (and do yearly), not only because America promises prosperity, but because it also offers a reasonable welcome within and a solid defense against threats from without. We are a far from perfect nation. But judged by world-historical standards, as Hegel and his late unlamented Marxist followers used to put it, we aren't doing so badly either.

Why, then, worry about what holds America together? Simply stated, many of us sense that amid the conflicting claims of multiculturalism, Afrocentrism, feminism, the men's movement, children's rights, right-to-die advocates, gays and lesbians, radical environmentalists, and co-dependency theorists, some common center has been lost. We seem to be failing even to transmit or maintain basic standards of civil behavior. The brittleness of much of our public discourse and the tendency to read discrete problems as evidence of vast social pathologies are only two symptoms of our anxiety. In some profound way we have become divided and confused about the basic constitution of our civic life.

The American Founders talked about the virtues and character necessary to sustain a free citizenry and professed a virtual creed of liberty. By contrast, some of us today regard a strong belief in universal civic principles and popular habits as the very definition of tyranny, a threat to pluralism, and an intolerance toward difference. In the last decade the term ayatollah has often been applied to American leaders, secular or religious, who have advocated strong action to arrest decline in civic behavior, personal morals, or public manners, and to restore some common notions of civil life.

Most shapers of American opinion seem to think that reasonable defense expenditures coupled with energetic social-justice programs are a sufficient glue for American society. But we have just had an object lesson in this matter. The former Soviet Union had enough weapons, manned by an enormous number of troops, to deter any outside attack. "Star Wars" research notwithstanding, the Soviets had assembled an extremely powerful fighting force that could have both protected the homeland and intimidated other nations for the foreseeable future. Soviet weakness was not technical, organizational, or even economic. Money could still have been found for defense and domestic food subsidies for years to come, even if the United States' sheer ability to produce wealth would have led eventually to a definite superiority over the Soviets. What collapsed in the Soviet Union was faith in the Marxist creed among the Marxist leaders themselves.

With this issue of *The American Character*, the Ethics and Public Policy Center announces a new initiative: the "Unum Project." As the name suggests, the Unum Project asks where in a nation conceived as *E pluribus unum* ("Out of many, one") unity exists. This question has particular relevance given the nation's current doubts about and departures from the original intentions of America's Founders.

This essay does not define America's common center. Rather, it begins a search that will be carried out during the upcoming year in a series of conferences, lectures, and seminars. Interested readers may write to the Center. We are grateful to the William H. Donner Foundation for its generous support of this project.

The West in general and the United States in particular could easily follow a similar path to disorder and decay. America has shown itself to be a remarkably stable polity, and it is not likely to break up into contending republics any time soon. Yet we should not be deceived by our own seemingly adamantine economic, technological, and military strength. Only the confident spirit behind them, in communion with our religious and republican heritage, keeps our system alive. We have had our laughs over the "vision thing," but the alternatives remain: either find vision or perish. Perhaps our deepest problem at present is that we seem occupied with visions of precisely the wrong kind.

Blurred Vision

Instead of real vision, what we have been pursuing for some time are political mirages. To expect the federal government to solve current widespread doubts about American society and our experiment in liberty is about as realistic as was expecting the Politburo to solve the disenchantment with Marxism in the former Soviet Union. Washington is the source of the skepticism, not the cure. Politicians are often described as being "out of touch" with the rest of the country. But the rupture is far deeper than that. Liechtenstein has been defined as "a bank masquerading as a country"; Washington has become an enclave of politicians, federal and District bureaucrats, lobbyists, journalists, and pundits masquerading as a popular government.

Washington may marginally help or, more usually, hinder independent initiatives in the private and social spheres. As the Eastern Europeans have learned, however, society—even civility itself—can be severely distorted by governments operating on abstract principle with delusions of grandeur. At best, decent governments may be trusted to keep up simple projects like the interstate highway system, national parks, and museums, and to deliver, when necessary, lethal military force. Occasionally, governments may do things that marginally reinforce civic virtue. But barring a truly great spirit in the White House—someone like Lincoln, who would understand the shape and limits of what the state may do to encourage a healthy civil society—we must look elsewhere for moral and civic reconstruction.

President Clinton's recent speech calling for massive reform of America's medical services is sad evidence of our current confusion. In a passage intended to convey the vision behind the proposed changes in the machinery, Clinton contended that rising above our differences of opinion on this issue "will go a long way toward defining who we are and who we intend to be as a people in this difficult and challenging era." In the television age every president, alas, must exaggerate to energize the nation for changes he thinks necessary. But the form of Clinton's appeal, exaggeration aside, is significant. He seemed to be presenting a wholly new American social compact instead of a complex and doubtful prescription for improving what is basically sound health care in America. There is vision of a sort in the Clinton agenda, but much of it is blurry or double vision.

First, no program like the health-care initiative much affects national morale when that morale has slipped for quite other reasons. Health-care reform will not do much toward remedying the basic cultural crisis that seems to have destroyed our sense of the common good. Nor does it even address the widespread social pathologies—hoards of poor unwed mothers, drug and alcohol abusers, and victims of urban violence—that create a good part of the health-care problem. It certainly will not define "who we are."

Some people think Clinton should leave well enough alone and deal solely with the hardest health-care cases. Others have proposed different forms of what is clearly a step on the way to socialized medicine. Still others opine that the Canadian single-payer system should be our model. Perhaps it should be, but Canadians are not noticeably united or invigorated, let alone "defined," by their health-care arrangements. If Canada has not broken up into separate French and English nations within the next five years, it will not be because of Canadians' commitment to universal health care. Neither do the citizens of Germany, England, France, Sweden, and a host of other countries compose sentimental hymns to their welfare arrangements, however generous. Human beings desire security, but no people in a developed nation has become quite so bourgeois as that. What holds a people together is something quite different—something that can exist with or without the advantages of modern medicine.

Clinton's vision is blurry, too, because by nature few people think very well of governmental programs and fewer still believe that they are generous enough. Clinton compared his health-care reform to the creation of Social Security, as if he were describing an animal of impeccable pedigree. Though many people benefit from Social Security and unemployment insurance, however, no one seems happy about the condition of these pro-

grams or profoundly grateful to the government and the American people for their checks. In both cases, recipients feel they worked and made contributions. The relatively small amounts they get in return do not move hearts with the noble vision of republican government. These programs are in perpetual crisis here and are currently being cut back in Europe and in other industrialized nations where they have become too lavish. At this point in history, Clinton's belief that health-care reform will make us feel we are caring for one another is anachronistic.

But most important, federal programs rarely affect national morale because they do not and cannot address the most characteristic modern problems. President Clinton understands that many Americans feel disconnected from one another and worry the social fabric has worn through in many places. We fear violence in our cities and moral breakdown in our homes, schools, and the culture in general. In Washington, the capital of the modern world, the city government talks about calling out the National Guard to stop violence and has already surrendered in the battle to curb teenage sex by giving away condoms in the schools.

In our fragmented condition government may take some simple steps to restore order, but it cannot serve as moral leader in the way the moment requires. Government mirrors an agenda that is primarily a question for individuals and civil society. How we are to live together remains our central question, and it cannot be answered by knowing how many CAT-scans, mammograms, and organ transplants we can or cannot afford.

Reinventing or De-inventing?

A further sign of our blurred vision is the fact that our president and vice president have been speaking during the past few months of "reinventing government." Though "reinventing government," too, is a calculated exaggeration, the repeated resort to a political language that always seems to be dealing with enormous, global, apocalyptic redefinition is troubling.

In the America of 1993, government is not exactly as lost an art as, say, Greek philosophy was in the Dark Ages. We have neither forgotten the subject nor destroyed the activity of the institutions we created. Rather than pursuing a new crusade to reinvent government, perhaps we should reassess how the American order has been "reinvented" over the past several decades.

During this time federal power has been constantly on the increase at the expense of local governments and private liberties. In fact, good arguments have been made that for some time the federal government in general and the Supreme Court in particular have been operating *ultra vires*, at least if we take seriously the Constitution's attempt to spell out and limit federal powers. It is curious that very few voices, other than those of the American Medical Association and the pharmaceutical companies, have even challenged whether the federal government has the *authority* to direct "one-seventh" of the U.S. economy. Americans accept that in a crisis—say when the Mississippi overflows its banks—only the federal government can respond adequately. By relentlessly describing the current state of medical provision as "a health-care crisis," the Clintons have helped foster the notion that no alternative to their agenda exists.

The vague popular sales pitch for "reinventing government," however, has far different roots. Vice President Gore's team had no trouble finding immense absurdities in the operations of the federal bureaucracy. And many of their recommendations seem sensible and long overdue. Their mistake, however, is their belief that the immensely complicated federal government—which the Clintons will make even more unwieldy by involving it more extensively in health care—is the proper instrument for addressing problems that can be solved only at a very different level. We used to understand that regions, states, and municipalities had to exist because they faced particular situations that called for particular solutions. Now we want to solve local problems by abolishing particularities.

We might do better to take conscious aim at reinventing what the Eastern Europeans are trying to restore in their own countries: civil society. Civil society does not mean secularism, or democratic machinery, or the well-managed bureaucratic state. Civil society is precisely a human order that is larger and richer than the state. The Clintons recognize the social problem; but their solution is not to rethink the basic form of welfare liberalism that has existed, even during Republican presidencies, in the past few decades. Instead, they believe that we just need more social tinkering. We would clear our minds of a good deal of cant, however, by seeing that agreement on issues such as health-care policy is worlds away from the kind of agreement in national spirit that really does "define" who we are as a people.

Diversity Is Us

A nation that boasts it rose *E pluribus unum* ("Out of many, one") must always value the plural.

What is good in contemporary multiculturalism continues to remind us that our experiment as a nation is not like the experience of most other countries. The French are French, Norwegians are Norwegians, and Greeks are Greeks because each of those groups has a common history, language, and culture. Americans have never been united simply in that way. Pluralism is our native condition.

Yet the American Founders did not aim at a nation that would consist merely of several tribes making camp and trading with one another. They envisioned an *unum* arising *e pluribus*, and already had some evidence that the process was under way. Occasionally, for good causes, they exaggerated such popular unity as already existed. John Jay, for example, writing in *Federalist* No. 2, says he has often noted with satisfaction that:

> Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs, and who, by their joint counsels, arms, and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established general liberty and independence.

The details of this portrait are, of course, a pious fiction. The Germans in Pennsylvania, Dutch in New York, Swedes in New Jersey, and French Huguenots in South Carolina would have been surprised to learn of their common ancestry. The Quakers, Catholics, Jews, and diverse Protestant bodies scattered throughout the early American republic professed no common religion. And in the 1780s even language and basic political beliefs were not as uniform as Jay here suggests.

And yet Jay's general point is correct. Popular customs and attitudes toward government had made Americans, for all their variety, a new and united people. In fact, in its grandest sweep, the thinking of the founding generation of Americans expressed the belief that this new understanding of human nature and political life had universal validity—and could be implemented, wherever conditions were right, with enormous increase in human happiness.

Curiously, at the very moment when American institutions are more open than at any time in their history to people of diverse backgrounds, the implied universality behind that openness is no longer the starting point for contemporary discussions of American unity. In great part, this stems from the fact that the Left has dominated recent American intellectual life. Over the past few decades the Left and a good portion of the old liberals have abandoned belief in universal principles and a common humanity, let alone more sophisticated concepts of person and community. Their obeisance to the holy trinity of race, gender, and ethnicity has enlarged the American prospect in minor ways. But it has discredited—at least in the eyes of the Left—the old American claim of equality before the law and fair public treatment of all. Such concepts are now denigrated as masks for the oppressive ideologies of dominant groups and "cultures."

Conservatives and old-style liberals have been decrying such readings of American institutions for some time. But the situation is now so desperate in intellectual circles that even some old radicals have woken to the dangers. Todd Gitlin, for example, a leading radical sociologist at Berkeley, recently lamented this privileging of difference and denial of universality by the Left:

> As a result, we find ourselves today in a most peculiar situation: the left and right have traded places, at least with respect to the sort of universalist rhetoric that can still stir the general public. Unable to go beyond the logic of identity politics, the disparate constituencies of the cultural left have ceded much political high ground to the right. . . . Ronald Reagan's genius lay in his ability to demarcate common ground on the right. Unless it learns to speak its own language of commonality, the shards of the left will be condemned to their separate sectors, sometimes glittering, sometimes smashed, and mostly marginal. [*Harper's*, September 1993, 20]

Gitlin's history is open to question, but his empirical observations are not: today the most emphatic denials of our common humanity and the greatest threats to a future course based on such an ideal come from precisely those intellectual sectors that once prided themselves on their independence from narrow nationalisms and provincialisms of any kind.

The old American desire to welcome diversity has, we have come to learn, practical as well as theoretical limits. For example, the school system of Montgomery County, a suburb of Washington, claims that it must handle 16,000 foreign students who come from 150 countries and speak 101 languages. Fairfax County, another Washington suburb, has 17,000 foreign-born students from 150 countries who speak 75 languages. The Washing-

ton area is somewhat unusual in this regard, but it differs from other urban centers only in degree, not in kind. The desire to take into account the various "cultures" within school districts like these is a generous impulse, but no public school system can really afford the time or money to do more than make some gestures at recognizing diversity on this scale. Schools just have too many other immediate tasks.

We have probably passed beyond the point where John Dewey's vision of the public schools as training centers for "democratic living" retains much validity. Even the original conception was, to put it mildly, highly optimistic. Only because families and communities had already largely shaped students to live in pluralist America were the schools even remotely capable of tying together their diverse backgrounds. Absent such efforts by others, the schools will be in over their heads.

In most instances, parents still try to encourage their children to participate in the mainstream culture. Why come to America in the first place if you do not wish in some way to do that? To participate does not mean to surrender everything from your particular background to some abstract "American" ethos. All immigrants to these shores, which is to say everyone's ancestors—including the native American peoples who migrated here during the last Ice Age—have had to adapt to new American conditions. But there are better and worse ways to negotiate the changes America requires.

As Peter Skerry has just shown in his enlightening *Mexican Americans* (Free Press), two models of immigrant participation in the mainstream have emerged in recent decades. To oversimplify somewhat a detailed and nuanced argument, in Texas people of Mexican origin are often severely discriminated against, Skerry says, but they practice an old-style ethnic politics—just as Jews, Poles, Irish, and Italians did earlier—that has drawn them into the larger community and has generally resulted in social and economic success. By contrast, Mexican-Americans in California are subject to less severe discrimination, but Mexican-American leaders there practice the group-grievance politics that emphasizes separatism and special treatment. Not surprisingly, Mexican-Americans in California have done far less well than their Texas counterparts, in terms of both social integration and economic advancement.

The broad lesson here may be that the older model not only succeeds in practice but is better able to handle discrimination. Much of the blame for the lower rate of Mexican-American success in California has to be laid at the door of group leaders who have mistaken their personal needs as spokesmen for the welfare of their people.

Looked at clearly, the very notion that "cultures" are perfectly preserved in America dissolves before our eyes. African-Americans may continue, even unconsciously, African ways in their lives and thought, but no existing African country has a "culture" that corresponds to African-American culture. Whether we think of jazz music or rap, street life in Harlem, or rural life in Mississippi, black American culture is inextricably intertwined with American life. As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., puts it: "Self-Africanization after 300 years in America is playacting" (*The Disuniting of America*, 103).

But the cultural traffic is not one way either. Mainstream America has been changed incalculably by minority figures. It would be difficult to imagine modern American society without Martin Luther King, Jr., Duke Ellington, or Colin Powell. Any programmatic effort to separate mainstream and black America can result only in the impoverishment of both.

The same is true of Asian-American, Polish-American, and Arab-American groups. People of foreign backgrounds who have not been changed by their involvement with mainstream American culture are rare birds indeed. In almost all cases, original cultures can be preserved only within some highly protected and vulnerable enclave that cannot long stand the centrifugal energies of its own young people. Separatism can be maintained here, but it exacts a price.

In Search of a Model

Our way of life has been enriched by multiple and conflicting social currents in the past, and our search for common bases of civic life should not reduce that richness to some bland common denominator. But is there any model on which Americans can draw to recover a more universal vision? And if we can identify such a model, is there sufficient will to carry forward the renewal needed to turn around some serious decay?

The answers to both these questions are quite uncertain. We have gotten so accustomed to the notion that individual whims and the claims of "cultures" trump all larger social demands that any attempt to set up a model, however circumspect and ample, will be immediately decried as dictating a single standard for diverse "communities." And yet Americans continue to share some

deep common agreements that we need to make explicit in our public language.

Zbigniew Brzezinski has argued recently that the greatest challenge now facing the West and America in particular is a moral challenge:

> America clearly needs a period of philosophical introspection and of cultural self-critique. It must come to grips with the realization that a relativist hedonism as the basic guide to life offers no firm social moorings, that a community which partakes of no shared absolute certainties but which instead puts a premium on individual self-satisfaction is a community threatened by dissolution. [*Crisis*, May 1993, 41]

The United States is also a leader, a model, and a potent cultural influence for the rest of the world. If we are unable to restrain ourselves at home, we will inevitably transmit that uncircumcised spirit abroad, to the detriment of people around the world.

How to begin the task of reform? We must first take up the difficult reconstruction of public discourse so that we are again allowed to speak of ethics, morals, and even manners as the very basis of our personal lives and social institutions. America's Founders were not ashamed to speak of truths with a moral and religious content: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men have been endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. . . ." The American theologian John Courtney Murray has argued that, at the very least, this brief phrase affirms three things: there are universal truths; we can know them; and we—we Americans—*hold* them because they guarantee our liberty as a nation and our dignity as human beings.

We are in crisis on many fronts precisely because we have forgotten our own roots and separated the realms of freedom and moral truth. We have all read John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* and think abstractly fair and impartial institutional practices are enough for the just society. But the genius of the American system is that its foundations are sunk quite a bit deeper than that.

An unexpected source has shed some light on these questions this fall. John Paul II's recent encyclical on morality, *Veritatis Splendor*, deliberately takes up the issue of conscience, human freedom, and social order. John Paul accepts the view that conscience is inviolable and that human freedom is one of God's sacred gifts to man. He denies, however, the view held by many people in developed democracies that skepticism and relativism are a bulwark against the tyranny of one narrow faction. The pope argues to the contrary that where certain views of the human person and human society are not widely embraced, democracies will fall not only into crisis but into bondage. Democracies throughout history have ended in tyranny precisely for want of devotion to that social creed. Weimar Germany, for example, had a democratic constitution provided by the sociological genius Max Weber; it had checks and balances and duly elected officials. Nevertheless, it put Hitler and the Nazis in power.

As Americans, we have a high respect for the rights of conscience. But if the pope is right, we have been reaping the consequences of a one-sided emphasis on conscience to the exclusion of truth for some time now. He quotes the great English convert John Henry Newman: "Conscience has rights because it has duties." Everyone from the pope to the Clintons has been speaking about duties and responsibilities lately. The difference is that the pope is willing to spell out precisely what people should do with their freedom. The Clintons put far greater emphasis on what the federal government will do for people who have abused freedom. You cannot hope to encourage responsibility by taking it away.

To reassert this moral *pons asinorum* is not a simple exercise in nostalgia for a lost moral consensus. There have always been limits to what a democratic polity can tolerate. Jefferson could say in a moment of carelessness that it did not matter to him if his neighbor believed in no god or twenty: "It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." But the sage of Monticello could afford to indulge such sentiments only because the cultural horizon of the world in which he lived made disagreements on basic morals few, whatever differences in theology existed.

Having lived to see both the rise of strange gods and the widespread eclipse of fundamental moral reasoning, we cannot be so nonchalant. Our pockets are picked and our legs broken, and we face even greater threats to life and liberty every day because of the absence of religion in some quarters and the presence of false gods in others. The United States should not become a theocracy, but our moral and religious challenges must be met with moral and religious responses that, while allowing for pluralism, also strongly assert the American creed of free people freely accepting responsibility for their own future.

The Therapeutic Challenge

Almost thirty years ago, before the social landscape was marked by some of the greatest recent

changes, the sociologist Philip Rieff observed:

> Americans no longer model themselves after the Christians or the Greeks. Nor are they such economic men as Europeans believe them to be. The political man of the Greeks, the religious man of the Hebrews and Christians, the enlightened economic man of eighteenth-century Europe (the original of that mythical present-day character, the "good European"), has been superseded by a new model for the conduct of life. Psychological man is, I suggest, more native to American culture than the Puritan sources of that culture would indicate. [*Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 58]

Rieff went on to observe that the "therapeutic" had made a clean sweep of all the other models.

Today therapy has become the almost universal language for discussing our social problems. For some reason, we now think it humane and democratic to tell people that they are not responsible or free. We speak glibly of people "recovering" from addictions to violence, drugs and alcohol, love, and even religion. When poor young men are violent, we blame the lack of role models. Society itself is accused of a homophobia that needs treatment. Vice President Al Gore has written in his environmental book, *Earth in the Balance*, that we are a "dysfunctional civilization" in "deep denial" about our abuse of nature.

There is a grain of truth in all these characterizations, but we must be extremely wary of their implications. For instance, when the federal government steps into the health business, unless health is very carefully defined, politically driven "therapies" and reeducation programs may expand enormously. Let us be clear: social therapy, like health-care reform and the desire to become multicultural, is a secondary question. It is another political mirage that sets up an intermediate term as the final principle on which our society rests. After we have been freed of our irrational compulsions by therapies, have seen to our health, and have welcomed the contributions of those previously marginalized, we still have the same task before us: deciding how we are to live together. We may pass beyond psychological and sociological irrationality, but we will still face the question of what is morally and socially rational.

Paradoxically, the United States' very stability and success have lulled many people into believing that the abandonment of moral language in favor of the language of therapy or inclusiveness carries no costs—or potential dangers. Yet civilization, as Freud pointed out while writing of its discontents, has a price. It requires, even in the esoteric context of Freudian therapies, finding ways to sublimate and channel selfish and socially destructive "natural" impulses into more fully human ways. Not all calls to modify the natural are mere repression; something naturally human interacts with our more animal nature to produce the strange rational animal that is a human being. The deep skepticism many people display in teaching sexual restraint to the young or expecting civic amity among adults reflects not so much a difference of ethical opinion as a tiredness at performing the tasks of civilization.

Reinventing a People

Recognizing the vital role that popular virtue plays in our kind of political system may lead us to look elsewhere than to government for the source of, and remedy for, our troubles. In modern America, accepting this truth will be hard. We are tempted to assume that the people are all right; it's just the politicians who have gone crazy. In comparative terms, the people are more stable, less given to large abstractions, and generally more virtuous than the hard-driving campaigners they usually elect to public office.

Despite the breakdown of the family, the spread of pornography and violence, and the growing tendency to look to the federal government for solutions to social problems, the American people still display some old virtues. They tend to believe in hard work, fair treatment of one another, and sound moral and religious principles. The replacement of the nation's old WASP leadership and the ridicule it has received in some intellectual circles, however, has given even stalwart Americans the notion that the basic unifying themes of our history have disappeared.

The most urgent task facing us as a society is to learn to restate those themes in ways that speak to our current discontents. The alternative will not be a "diverse" nation but disaster. As Tocqueville wrote:

> Without ideas in common, there is no common action, and, without common action, there may still exist human beings, but not a social entity. In order for society to exist, and, even more, to prosper, it is then necessary that the spirits of all the citizens be assembled and held together by certain leading ideas; and that cannot happen unless each of them comes from time to time to draw his opinions from the same source, and unless each consents to received a certain number of ready-made beliefs. [*Democracy in America*, vol. 2.1.2]

We still find such beliefs implicit in many Ameri-

can practices. We need to make them explicit.

Rather than reinventing government, we should concentrate on reinventing the American people. This far more pressing task is neither a sentimental nor a nostalgic one. We need to face current problems in the light of the truths we have held since our foundation. Those truths wedded human dignity, which arose from religious respect for the value of all persons, with republican realism about political institutions. The Founders were willing to risk that a people given control over its own destiny would respond to the challenge. Whatever our current crises, we are not meeting them with our deepest spiritual and moral insights.

To begin with, we need to rethink several large questions simultaneously, especially what kind of lessons current law and governmental practice are teaching the people. Somehow, for example, we have come to think that government payments give us dignity while support from family, church, and neighborhood make us dependent—virtually the opposite of our former beliefs and clearly a self-deception.

This mentality carries an additional cost. Where government moves into more and more social sectors, it inevitably tends to homogenize the very diversity that so many claim to cherish. American higher education, for example, used to be wonderfully diverse, with denominational, all-male, all-female, black, and other specialized schools filling various needs. Several decades into federal support for schools and guaranteed student loans, diversity is talked about a great deal. But, in fact, every institution is now required to be "diverse" in absolutely uniform ways.

This should be a cautionary tale for all sectors of society that see federal action as a simple solution to their problems. We were more diverse and more unified when we were less commanded to be so by federal legislators.

We also need a transfusion of new terms into the public sphere. Local community, industry, and agriculture form the living matrix for individuals and families, and our public speech used to reflect that truth. It may seem a paradox, but the people of a large republic like ours feel more a part of the national ethos when they are more closely a part of local life.

The mass media, particularly television, have fostered a false sense of interconnectedness. Despite our ability to follow events anywhere in the world, we feel more distant from one another at home than at any time in our past. We need to reexamine not only the amount of violence, but the glorification of sex and corruption on television. We also need to rethink entirely what powerful modern communication technologies mean for our way of life. The ancient Athenians thought Socrates corrupted the young, but even Socrates did not have their attention six hours a day.

It is no mere coincidence that in almost every portrayal of the future, from Orwell's *1984* to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, complex machinery and political control are seen as, together, enfeebling or threatening the human race. Prospects for grand schemes like the data superhighway and universal medical services should prompt us to recall such warnings. Our primary task is to find ways to be less, not more, dependent on single mechanisms. Popular unity can accommodate diversity; bureaucratic uniformity and machinery cannot.

If we embrace more vigorously universal principles of human freedom and responsibility against all mechanical explanations of human behavior and against all reductive visions of human society, we may be able to escape the false unities of current politics. Relying on millions of individuals is a risk, because those individuals will be irresponsible as well as responsible, will abuse freedom as well as use it. America's Founders studied history, and they knew most democracies ended in tyranny. They took the risk.

Unless we wish to become a new kind of society under a different form of government, we must return to that basic faith—the faith that millions of free individuals working together in a free society that rewards and honors virtue, and discourages and blames vice and dependency, create the only unity finally worthy of us as Americans.

Robert Royal

ETHICS AND PUBLIC POLICY CENTER

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