

# Remember this: It's the culture, stupid

Take a bow, Dan Quayle. That muffled noise in your ear is the applause of the president, the hero of Hollywood. Murphy Brown has finally been taken to the woodshed.

"I read the whole speech, the 'Murphy Brown speech,'" the president told an interviewer for NBC News. "I thought there were a lot of good things in that speech. I think he got too cute with 'Murphy Brown,' but it is certainly true that this country would be better off if our babies were born into two-parent families."

The president finally "got it." He not only defended Dan Quayle, who

made his Murphy Brown remarks shortly after the



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was once the word used by elitists to describe a special interest in the arts, but now nearly everybody — Dan Quayle and Bill Clinton included — recognizes that culture refers to the

Los Angeles riots, but joined the Quayle message to his own: "The rise of violence is related to the decline of traditional families and upbringing and a decline in the economy."

The slogan that ought to be posted in the policy rooms of the White House is "It's the culture, stupid." Culture

impact of the creative spirit on all our lives.

An anthropologist once defined culture as "man's past working on the present to shape the future." It's the "shaping" that's of serious concern, and where the president appropriately focused his attention in Hollywood when he admonished his buddies.

"There are few things more powerful in any time or place than culture," he told an audience of movie makers and shakers. "The ability of culture to elevate or debase is really profound."

This is precisely what the "traditional values" folk have been saying all along. John Donne said it even better centuries ago: "No man is an island, entire of itself." This recognition is dawning on people in a lot of places.

The French are fighting Hollywood in the negotiations over GATT, the international trade and tariff treaty now being negotiated in Brussels, to make it tougher for U.S. movies and television shows to get into their country. France threatens to veto any GATT agreement that does not preserve French subsidies on movies and television.

"If culture is included in GATT," Jack Lang, France's former culture minister told the Wall Street Journal, "it will mean the mental colonization of Europe."

The box office appeal of violence in American movies represents only part of what irritates the French. There's lots of violence in the French movie "Germinal," for example, based on Emile Zola's novel. (Angry women, a la Lorena Bobbitt, castrate a shopkeeper who won't give the cus-

tomers credit, and carry the dismembered organ around to show others as an object lesson.) But the French fear their star Gerard Depardieu is no real competition for Arnold Schwarzenegger in "Terminator 2," 3 or 4, and that French moviemakers fall behind at the box office because they can't play the game with American marketers and promoters.

Americans might let the French keep their subsidies if only to show that American cultural exports will succeed despite the subsidies. That famous bombshell Marie Antoinette said it best: "Let them eat better movies."

Debates about culture often confuse issues of art and entertainment. Fine art has always relied on educated patrons, from the Medicis of Florence to the Mellons of Pittsburgh. Entertainment relies heavily on spectacle, appealing readily to our lighter/lower selves.

The French are most concerned about preserving their identity in

the global culture, and reviving the art cinema which appeals to that identity. But French cinema has been in decline in the past two decades.

Bill Clinton is concerned about cultural identity, too, but from a different perspective, aware that the once-common values are no longer so common. Unsupervised children in broken families have no cultural filter to understand what they see.

"What might be entertaining to us, a violent, thrilling movie or television program, a torrid but fundamentally amoral use and manipulation of people... can unintentionally... set forth a chain reaction of even more impulsive behavior, even more inability to deal with conflict in nonviolent ways," the president told the Hollywood moguls. "We must rebuild this country fundamentally, and we have to have the support of people who shape our culture."

Dan Quayle, are you moonlighting as a presidential speechwriter?

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