

Getting Used to Decadence: The Spirit of Democracy in Modern America

By William J. Bennett

It is an honor to be with you this evening to celebrate the 20th anniversary of The Heritage Foundation—America's most distinguished and consequential public policy organization. This institution has made an enormous contribution to the political and intellectual life of the nation.

During the last two decades, The Heritage Foundation has done much to elevate the public debate and to shape public policy in Washington. And had it shaped more, we would all be better off. Under the watchful eye of its president, Ed Feulner, it has labored to keep conservative Administrations on a straight and principled path. During liberal Administrations, The Heritage Foundation has provided much-needed sunlight and scrutiny. It is probably the foremost institutional critic in Washington. And just as important, Heritage consistently points to the better way. It never curses the political darkness without also lighting a candle of good sense. Its work has never been more needed, and there is no institution with which I am more proud to be associated.

America Through Foreign Eyes

We gather in a spirit of celebration. But tonight I speak out of a spirit of concern—for this evening my task is to provide an assessment of the social and cultural condition of modern American society. And while many people agree that there is much to be concerned about these days, I don't think that people fully appreciate the depth, or even the nature, of what threatens us. Therefore, we do not yet have a firm hold on what it will take to better us. We need to have an honest conversation about these issues.

Tonight I offer my contribution to the conversation.

A few months ago I had lunch with a friend of mine, a man who has written for a number of political journals and who now lives in Asia. During our conversation the topic turned to America—specifically, America as seen through the eyes of foreigners.

During our conversation, he told me what he had observed during his travels: that while the world still regards the United States as the leading economic and military power on earth, this same world no longer beholds us with the moral respect it once did. When the rest of the world looks at America, he said, they see no longer a "shining city on a hill." Instead, they see a society in decline, with exploding rates of crime and social pathologies. We all know that foreigners often come here in fear—and once they are here, they travel in fear. It is our shame to realize that they have good reason to fear; a record number of them get killed here.

Today, many who come to America believe they are visiting a degraded society. Yes, America still offers plenty of jobs, enormous opportunity, and unmatched material and physical comforts. But there is a growing sense among many foreigners that when they come here, they are slum-

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ming. I have, like many of us, an instinctive aversion to foreigners harshly judging my nation; yet I must concede that much of what they think is true.

I recently had a conversation with a D.C. cab driver who is doing graduate work at American University. He told me that once he receives his master's degree he is going back to Africa. His reason? His children. He doesn't think they are safe in Washington. He told me that he didn't want them to grow up in a country where young men will paw his daughter and expect her to be an "easy target," and where his son might be a different kind of target—the target of violence from the hands of other young males. "It is more civilized where I come from," said this man from Africa. I urged him to move outside of Washington; things should improve.

But it is not only violence and urban terror that signal decay. We see it in many forms. *Newsweek* columnist Joe Klein recently wrote about Berenice Belizaire, a young Haitian girl who arrived in New York in 1987. When she arrived in America she spoke no English and her family lived in a cramped Brooklyn apartment. Eventually Berenice enrolled at James Madison High School, where she excelled. According to Judith Khan, a math teacher at James Madison, "[The immigrants are] why I love teaching in Brooklyn. They have a drive in them that we no longer seem to have." And far from New York City, in the beautiful Berkshire mountains where I went to school, Philip Kasinitz, an assistant professor of sociology at Williams College, has observed that Americans have become the object of ridicule among immigrant students on campus. "There's an interesting phenomenon. When immigrant kids criticize each other for getting lazy or loose, they say, 'You're becoming American,'" Kasinitz says. "Those who work hardest to keep American culture at bay have the best chance of becoming American success stories."

Last year an article was published in *The Washington Post* which pointed out how students from other countries adapt to the lifestyle of most American teens. Paulina, a Polish high school student studying in the United States, said that when she first came here she was amazed by the way teens spent their time. According to Paulina:

In Warsaw, we would talk to friends after school, go home and eat with our parents and then do four or five hours of homework. When I first came here, it was like going into a crazy world, but now I am getting used to it. I'm going to Pizza Hut and watching TV and doing less work in school. I can tell it is not a good thing to get used to.

Think long and hard about these words, spoken by a young Polish girl about America: "When I first came here it was like going into a crazy world, but now I am getting used to it." And, "I can tell it is not a good thing to get used to."

Something has gone wrong with us.

This is a conclusion which I come to with great reluctance. During the late 1960s and 1970s, I was one of those who reacted strongly to criticisms of America that swept across university campuses. I believe that many of those criticisms—"Amerika" as an inherently repressive, imperialist, and racist society—were wrong then, and they are wrong now. But intellectual honesty demands that we accept facts that we would sometimes like to wish away. Hard truths are truths nonetheless. And the hard truth is that something *has* gone wrong with us.

America is not in danger of becoming a Third World country; we are too rich, too proud, and too strong to allow that to happen. It is not that we live in a society completely devoid of virtue. Many people live well, decently, even honorably. There are families, schools, churches, and neighborhoods that work. There are places where virtue is taught and learned. But there is a lot less of this than there ought to be. And we know it. John Updike put it this way: "The fact that... we still live well cannot ease the pain of feeling that we no longer live nobly."

Empirical Evidence of Social Regression

Let me briefly outline some of the empirical evidence that points to cultural decline, evidence that while we live well materially, we don't live nobly. Earlier this year I released, through the auspices of The Heritage Foundation, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*, the most comprehensive statistical portrait available of behavioral trends over the last thirty years. Among the findings: since 1960, the population has increased 41 percent; the gross domestic product has nearly tripled; and total social spending by all levels of government (measured in constant 1990 dollars) has risen from \$142.73 billion to \$787.00 billion—more than a five-fold increase.

But during the same thirty-year period, there has been a 560 percent increase in violent crime; more than a 400 percent increase in illegitimate births; a quadrupling in divorces; a tripling of the percentage of children living in single-parent homes; more than a 200 percent increase in the teenage suicide rate; and a drop of 75 points in the average S.A.T. scores of high-school students.

These are not good things to get used to.

Today 30 percent of all births and 68 percent of black births are illegitimate. By the end of the decade, according to the most reliable projections, 40 percent of all American births and 80 percent of minority births will occur out of wedlock.

These are not good things to get used to.

And then there are the results of an on-going teacher survey. Over the years, teachers have been asked to identify the top problems in America's schools. In 1940, teachers identified them as talking out of turn; chewing gum; making noise; running in the hall; cutting in line; dress code infractions; and littering. When asked the same question in 1990, teachers identified drug use; alcohol abuse; pregnancy; suicide; rape; robbery; and assault.

These are not good things to get used to, either.

Consider, too, where the United States ranks in comparison with the rest of the industrialized world. We are at or near the top in rates of abortions, divorces, and unwed births. We lead the industrialized world in murder, rape, and violent crime. And in elementary and secondary education, we are at or near the bottom in achievement scores.

The American Ethos

These facts alone are evidence of substantial social regression. But there are other signs of decay, ones that do not so easily lend themselves to quantitative analyses (some of which I have already suggested in my opening anecdotes). What I am talking about is the moral, spiritual, and aesthetic character and habits of a society—what the ancient Greeks referred to as its *ethos*. And here, too, we are facing serious problems. For there is a coarseness, a callousness, a cynicism, a banality, and a vulgarity to our time. There are just too many signs of de-civilization—that is, civilization gone rotten. And the worst of it has to do with our children. Apart from the numbers and the specific facts, there is the on-going, chronic crime against children: the crime of making them old before their time. We live in a culture which at times seems almost dedicated to the corruption of the young, to assuring the loss of their innocence before their time.

This may sound overly pessimistic or even alarmist, but I think this is the way it is. And my worry is that people are not unsettled enough; I don't think we are angry enough. We have become inured to the cultural rot that is setting in. Like Paulina, we are getting used to it, even though it is not a good thing to get used to. People are experiencing atrocity overload, losing their capacity for shock, disgust, and outrage. A few weeks ago eleven people were murdered in New York City within ten hours; as far as I can tell, it barely caused a stir.

Two weeks ago a violent criminal, who mugged and almost killed a 72-year old man and was shot by a police officer while fleeing the scene of the crime, was awarded \$4.3 million. Virtual silence.

And during last year's Los Angeles riots, Damian Williams and Henry Watson were filmed pulling an innocent man out of a truck, crushing his skull with a brick, and doing a victory dance over his fallen body. Their lawyers then built a successful legal defense on the proposition that people cannot be held accountable for getting caught up in mob violence. ("They just got caught up in the riot," one juror told *The New York Times*. "I guess maybe they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.") When the trial was over and these men were found not guilty on most counts, the sound you heard throughout the land was relief. We are "defining deviancy down," in Senator Moynihan's memorable phrase. And in the process we are losing a once-reliable sense of civic and moral outrage.

Listen to this story from former New York City Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly:

A number of years ago there began to appear, in the windows of automobiles parked on the streets of American cities, signs which read: "No radio." Rather than express outrage, or even annoyance at the possibility of a car break-in, people tried to communicate with the potential thief in conciliatory terms. The translation of "no radio" is: "Please break into someone else's car, there's nothing in mine." These "no radio" signs are flags of urban surrender. They are hand-written capitulations. Instead of "no radio," we need new signs that say "no surrender."

And what is so striking today is not simply the increased number of violent crimes, but the nature of those crimes. It is no longer "just" murder we see, but murders with a prologue, murders accompanied by acts of unspeakable cruelty and inhumanity.

And from pop culture, with our own ears, we have heard the terrible debasement of music. Music, harmony, and rhythm find their way into the soul and fasten mightily upon it, Plato's *Republic* teaches us. Because music has the capacity to lift us up or to bring us down, we need to pay more careful attention to it. It is a steep moral slide from Bach, and even Buddy Holly, to Guns 'n Roses and 2 Live Crew. This week an indicted murderer, Snoop Doggy Dogg, saw his rap album, "Doggystyle," debut at number one. It may be useful for you to read, as I have, some of his lyrics and other lyrics from heavy metal and rap music, and then ask yourself: how much worse could it possibly get? And then ask yourself: what will happen when young boys who grow up on mean streets, without fathers in their lives, are constantly exposed to music which celebrates the torture and abuse of women?

There is a lot of criticism directed at television these days—the casual cruelty, the rampant promiscuity, the mindlessness of sit-coms and soap operas. Most of the criticisms are justified. But this is not the worst of it. The worst of television is the daytime television talk shows, where indecent exposure is celebrated as a virtue. It is hard to remember now, but there was once a time when personal failures, subliminal desires, and perverse taste were accompanied by guilt or embarrassment, at least by silence. Today these are a ticket to appear as a guest on the Sally Jessy Raphael show, or one of the dozens or so shows like it. I asked my staff to provide me with a list of some of the daytime talk-show topics from only the last two weeks. They include: cross-dressing couples; a three-way love affair; a man whose chief aim in life is to sleep with women and fool them into thinking that he is using a condom during sex; women who can't say no to cheating; prostitutes who love their jobs; a former drug dealer; and an interview with a young girl caught in the middle of a bitter custody battle. These shows present a two-edged problem to soci-

ety. The first edge is that some people want to appear on these shows in order to expose themselves. The second edge is that lots of people are tuning in to watch them expose themselves.

This is not a good thing to get used to.

Who's to blame? Here I would caution conservatives against the tendency to blame liberals for our social disorders. Contemporary liberalism does have a lot for which to answer; many of its doctrines have wrought a lot of damage. Universities, intellectuals, think tanks, and government departments have put a lot of poison into the reservoirs of national discourse. But to simply point the finger of blame at liberals and elites is wrong. The hard fact of the matter is that this was not something done to us; it is also something we have done to ourselves. Liberals may have been peddling from an empty wagon, but we were buying.

Much of what I have said is familiar to many of you. But why is this happening? What is behind all this? Well, again, intelligent arguments have been advanced as to why these things have come to pass. Thoughtful people have pointed to materialism and consumerism; an overly permissive society; the writings of Rousseau, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche; the legacy of the 1960s; and so on. There is truth in almost all of these accounts. Let me give you mine.

Spiritual Acedia

I submit to you that the real crisis of our time is spiritual. Specifically, our problem is what the ancients called *acedia*. *Acedia* is the sin of sloth. But *acedia*, as understood by the saints of old, is not laziness about life's affairs (which is what we normally think sloth to be). *Acedia* is something else; properly understood, *acedia* is an aversion to and a negation of *spiritual* things. *Acedia* reveals itself as an undue concern for external affairs and worldly things. *Acedia* is spiritual torpor, an absence of zeal for divine things. And it brings with it, according to the ancients, "a sadness, a sorrow of the world." *Acedia* manifests itself in man's "joyless, ill-tempered, and self-seeking rejection of the nobility of the children of God." The slothful man hates the spiritual, and he wants to be free of its demands. The old theologians taught that *acedia* arises from a heart steeped in the worldly and carnal, and from a low esteem of divine things. It eventually leads to a hatred of the good altogether. And with hatred comes more rejection, more ill-temper, sadness, and sorrow.

Spiritual *acedia* is not a new condition, of course. It is the seventh capital sin. But today it is in ascendance. In coming to this conclusion, I have relied on two literary giants—men born on vastly different continents, the product of two completely different worlds, and shaped by wholly different experiences—yet writers who possess strikingly similar views, and who have had a profound impact on my own thinking. It was an unusual and surprising moment to find their views coincident.

When the late novelist Walker Percy was asked what concerned him most about the future of America, he answered:

Probably the fear of seeing America, with all its great strength and beauty and freedom... gradually subside into decay through default and be defeated, not by the Communist movement... but from within by weariness, boredom, cynicism, greed and in the end helplessness before its great problems.

And here are the words of the prophetic Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (echoing his 1978 Harvard commencement address in which he warned of the West's "spiritual exhaustion"):

In the United States the difficulties are not a Minotaur or a dragon—not imprisonment, hard labor, death, government harassment and censorship—but cupidity, boredom, sloppiness, indifference. Not the acts of a mighty all-pervading repressive government but the failure of a listless public to make use of the freedom that is its birthright.

What afflicts us, then, is a corruption of the heart, a turning away in the soul. Our aspirations, our affections, and our desires are turned toward the wrong things. And only when we turn them toward the right things—toward enduring, noble, spiritual things—will things get better.

Lest I leave the impression of bad news on all fronts, I do want to be clear about the areas where I think we have made enormous gains: material comforts, economic prosperity, and the spread of democracy around the world. The American people have achieved a standard of living unimagined fifty years ago. We have seen extraordinary advances in medicine, science, and technology. Life expectancy has increased more than twenty years during the last six decades. Opportunity and equality have been extended to those who were once denied them. And of course America prevailed in our “long, twilight struggle” against communism.

Impressive achievements all.

Yet even with all of this, the conventional analysis is still that this nation’s major challenges have to do with getting more of the same: achieving greater economic growth, job creation, increased trade, health care, or more federal programs. Some of these things are desirable (greater economic growth and increased trade); some of them are not (more federal programs). But to look to any or all of them as the solution to what ails us is akin to assigning names to images and shadows, it so widely misses the mark.

If we have full employment and greater economic growth—if we have cities of gold and alabaster—but our children have not learned how to walk in goodness, justice, and mercy, then the American experiment, no matter how gilded, will have failed.

I realize I have laid down strong charges, a tough indictment. Some may question them. But if I am wrong, if my diagnosis is not right, then someone must explain to me this: why do Americans feel so bad when things are economically, militarily, and materially so good? Why amidst this prosperity and security are enormous numbers of people—almost 70 percent of the public—saying that we are off track? This paradox is described in the Scottish author John Buchan’s work. Writing a half-century ago, he described the “coming of a too garish age, when life would be lived in the glare of neon lamps and the spirit would have no solitude.” Here is what Buchan wrote about his nightmare world:

In such a [nightmare] world everyone would have leisure. But everyone would be restless, for there would be no spiritual discipline in life....It would be a feverish, bustling world, self-satisfied and yet malcontent, and under the mask of a riotous life there would be death at the heart. In the perpetual hurry of life there would be no chance of quiet for the soul....In such a bagman’s paradise, where life would be rationalised and padded with every material comfort, there would be little satisfaction for the immortal part of man.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, many have achieved this bagman’s paradise. And this is not a good thing to get used to.

In identifying spiritual exhaustion as the central problem, I part company with many. There is a disturbing reluctance in our time to talk seriously about matters spiritual and religious. Why? Perhaps it has to do with the modern sensibility's profound discomfort with the language and the commandments of God. Along with other bad habits, we have gotten used to not talking about the things which matter most—and so, we don't.

One will often hear that religious faith is a private matter that does not belong in the public arena. But this analysis does not hold—at least on some important points. Whatever your faith—or even if you have none at all—it is a fact that when millions of people stop believing in God, or when their belief is so attenuated as to be belief in name only, enormous public consequences follow. And when this is accompanied by an aversion to spiritual language by the political and intellectual class, the public consequences are even greater. How could it be otherwise? In modernity, *nothing* has been more consequential, or more public in its consequences, than large segments of American society privately turning away from God, or considering Him irrelevant, or declaring Him dead. Dostoyevsky reminded us in *The Brothers Karamazov* that “if God does not exist, everything is permissible.” We are now seeing “everything.” And much of it is not good to get used to.

Social Regeneration

What can be done? First, here are the short answers: do not surrender; get mad; and get in the fight. Now, let me offer a few, somewhat longer, prescriptions.

1) At the risk of committing heresy before a Washington audience, let me suggest that our first task is to recognize that, in general, we place too much hope in politics. I am certainly not denying the impact (for good and for ill) of public policies. I would not have devoted the past decade of my life to public service—and I could not work at The Heritage Foundation—if I believed that the work with which I was engaged amounted to nothing more than striving after wind and ashes. But it is foolish, and futile, to rely *primarily* on politics to solve moral, cultural, and spiritual afflictions.

The last quarter-century has taught politicians a hard and humbling lesson: there are intrinsic limits to what the state can do, particularly when it comes to imparting virtue, and forming and forging character, and providing peace to souls. Samuel Johnson expressed this (deeply conservative and true) sentiment when he wrote “How small, of all that human hearts endure, That part which laws or kings can cause or cure!”

King Lear was a great king—sufficient to all his political responsibilities and obligations. He did well as king, but as a father and a man, he messed up terribly. The great king was reduced to the mud and ignominy of the heath, cursing his daughters, his life, his gods. Politics is a great adventure; it is greatly important; but its proper place in our lives has been greatly exaggerated. Politics—especially inside the Beltway politics—has too often become the graven image of our time.

2) We must have public policies that once again make the connection between our deepest beliefs and our legislative agenda. Do we Americans, for example, believe that man is a spiritual being with a potential for individual nobility and moral responsibility? Or do we believe that his ultimate fate is to be merely a soulless cog in the machine of state? When we teach sex-education courses to teen-agers, do we treat them as if they are young animals in heat? Or do we treat them as children of God?

In terms of public policy, the failure is not so much intellectual; it is a failure of will and courage. Right now we are playing a rhetorical game: we say one thing and we do another. Consider the following:

- ◆ We say that we desire from our children more civility and responsibility, but in many of our schools we steadfastly refuse to teach right and wrong.
- ◆ We say that we want law and order in the streets, but we allow criminals, including violent criminals, to return to those same streets.
- ◆ We say that we want to stop illegitimacy, but we continue to subsidize the kind of behavior that virtually guarantees high rates of illegitimacy.
- ◆ We say that we want to discourage teenage sexual activity, but in classrooms all across America educators are more eager to dispense condoms than moral guidance.
- ◆ We say that we want more families to stay together, but we liberalize divorce laws and make divorce easier to attain.
- ◆ We say that we want to achieve a color-blind society and judge people by the content of their character, but we continue to count by race, skin, and pigment.
- ◆ We say that we want to encourage virtue and honor among the young, but it has become a mark of sophistication to shun the language of morality.

3) We desperately need to recover a sense of the fundamental purpose of education, which is to provide for the intellectual *and* moral education of the young. From the ancient Greeks to the founding fathers, moral instruction was the central task of education. "If you ask what is the good of education," Plato said, "the answer is easy—that education makes good men, and that good men act nobly." Jefferson believed that education should aim at improving one's "morals" and "faculties." And of education, John Locke said this: "Tis virtue that we aim at, hard virtue, and not the subtle arts of shifting." Until a quarter-century or so ago, this consensus was so deep as to go virtually unchallenged. Having departed from this time-honored belief, we are now reaping the whirlwind. And so we talk not about education as the architecture of souls, but about "skills facilitation" and "self-esteem" and about being "comfortable with ourselves."

4) As individuals and as a society, we need to return religion to its proper place. Religion, after all, provides us with moral bearings. And if I am right and the chief problem we face is spiritual impoverishment, then the solution depends, finally, on spiritual renewal. I am not speaking here about coerced spiritual renewal—in fact, there is no such thing—but about renewal freely taken.

The enervation of strong religious beliefs—in both our private lives as well as our public conversations—has de-moralized society. We ignore religion and its lessons at our peril. But instead of according religion its proper place, much of society ridicules and disdains it, and mocks those who are serious about their faith. In America today, the only respectable form of bigotry is bigotry directed against religious people. This antipathy toward religion cannot be explained by the well-publicized moral failures and financial excesses of a few leaders or charlatans, or by the seriousness of some of their followers. No, the reason for hatred of religion is because it forces modern man to confront matters he would prefer to ignore.

Every serious student of American history, familiar with the writings of the founders, knows the civic case for religion. It provides society with a moral anchor—and nothing else has yet been found to substitute for it. Religion tames our baser appetites, passions, and impulses. And it helps us to thoughtfully sort through the *ordo amoris*, the order of the loves.

But remember, too, that for those who believe, it is a mistake to treat religion merely as a useful means to worldly ends. Religion rightly demands that we take seriously not only the commandments of the faith, but that we also take seriously the object of the faith. Those who believe know that although we are pilgrims and sojourners and wanderers in this earthly kingdom, ultimately we are citizens of the City of God—a City which man did not build and cannot de-

stroy, a City where there is no sadness, where the sorrows of the world find no haven, and where there is peace the world cannot give.

Pushing Back

Let me conclude. In his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner declared, "I decline to accept the end of man." Man will not merely endure but prevail because, as Faulkner said, he alone among creatures "has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

Today we must in the same way decline to accept the end of moral man. We must carry on the struggle, for our children. We will push back hard against an age that is pushing hard against us.

When we do, we will emerge victorious against the trials of our time. When we do, we will save our children from the decadence of our time. And when we do, we will be able to sing confidently again about the country we love, in those beautiful words of old:

*O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved
And mercy more than life!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine,
Till all success be nobleness
And every gain divine!*

We have a lot of work to do.

Let's get to it.

