

# THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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The  
American  
Tradition of  
Personal  
Responsibility

*By Dennis Prager*



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# The American Tradition Of Personal Responsibility

By Dennis Prager

There is a saying, apparently from Oregon, that you do not know how big a tree is until you cut it down. It is a human tendency not to value something until it is under assault or lost.

I never would have thought about the American tradition of personal responsibility in any systematic fashion if it were not being attacked as broadly as it is. The same thing happened to me with regard to religion. I came to religion in large measure because I have seen what happens when it disappears. I came to realize that there is no alternative to religion, morally and in many other ways. That is why, though I am a Jew, I hold that a post-Christian America is a frightening prospect. I know that when Christianity died in Europe in the twentieth century, Communism and Nazism arose in its place.

Who would have thought about personal responsibility so much were it not for the present onslaught against it? I will therefore address the onslaught more than I will the specific tradition. But I begin with the tradition.

## The American Ideal of Individualism

Why was the United States founded? The noted liberal thinker, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in his book *The Disuniting of America*—about “multiculturalism” and the balkanization of America—made me aware of how to formulate a concise answer.

Ask the average American today what is unique about the American idea, and I doubt you will get a coherent answer. The last generations of Americans have failed to transmit the worth of our society—just as, incidentally, most Jews and Christians of the last generation failed to transmit the worth of their respective religions. Nearly all people take things for granted—back to my opening thesis. We assume that since things have gone well until now, they will go well in the future. Yet, Trotsky was right: we need a “permanent revolution.” Every generation has to rediscover—though not necessarily reinvent—the wheel, morally and ideologically. You cannot rely on the fact that because parents do something, their children will. The fact that you play Mozart beautifully on the piano guarantees nothing about your children’s love of Mozart, let alone their ability to play it. Parents and educators need to teach each succeeding generation the unique worth of Mozart.

So, too, parents and educators need to teach each succeeding generation of Americans the unique worth of America. By and large, they have not.

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What is unique about our society? *The United States was a society founded on the almost unique belief that who your ancestors are is far less important than who you are.* This was a monumentally important belief about the worth of the individual. Of course, there was a terrible exception in practice—the attitude toward blacks. The idea of the supreme worth of the individual rather than of his ancestry was violated in the case of the African. But holding values and violating them was hardly unique to many of our country's founders. It is true for all of us. We all have ideals that we do not fully practice. But I far prefer to live in a society that says "Thou shalt not steal," even though people violate it, than in a society that does not say "Thou shalt not steal."

We need ideals even though people do not always practice them, and even though advocating ideals means that people will inevitably be called hypocrites when they do not live by the ideals that they profess. Hypocrisy, when so understood, is a positive thing. It means that at least you have a value that can render you hypocritical. I therefore have very little problem with hypocrisy. The only alternative is for there to be no ideals. Only then could no one be a hypocrite.

Our society was founded on an ideal: Who your ancestors are doesn't matter; who *you* are matters. You rise or fall on your achievement or your failure. That and economic opportunity, which is a result of the American individualist ideal, are the primary reasons why America has been the world's most popular magnet to people from every culture. That is why immigrants often say that they are more comfortable here than in their native El Salvador, their native Nigeria, or anywhere else. That is why, historically, we tended to attract individualists who wanted to be judged not by their ethnicity, geography, or race, but by who they are.

Now, of course, this value, like any value, can be taken to an extreme. And it is when people have no attachments at all and become atomized individuals. That is one reason why a part of America suffers a terrible plague of loneliness. As a talk show host for 12 years, I have become aware of this widespread loneliness from my callers. The number of Americans who have no attachments to anything—not to a religious group, not to a stamp club, not to a musical society—is large and rising. That's the dark side of individualism—the sun-dering of ties to any group. By the way, I am convinced that animal love in America has reached the point that it has reached because of this lack of human attachments. For many people, their greatest bond is with an animal. It is nice to have pets, but when pets become "animal companions," we have crossed a threshold. It is important to remember that every blessing can have its curse.

To return, our society was founded on the value of the individual, and that is a major reason many of us love it. Our ancestors moved here not just because it was economically advantageous. After all, why do people line up at American embassies more than at Swiss, Saudi, or Japanese embassies? Saudi Arabia and Japan are richer per capita than America is. But these people know not only that they can make a living here, but also that they could fit in. Because whatever their color, race, or religion, it is often better to be in America.

As Orlando Patterson, who is black and a professor of sociology at Harvard, has noted, a black has more political and social and civil rights in the United States than anywhere in Africa. It is also true about an Arab. An Arab coming to this country has more rights than he or she does in nearly any Arab country. Speaking from within my religion, Reform and Conservative Jews have more religious rights here than in Israel. It is ironic, and yet it is a fact. And I note this with enormous respect for Israel's extraordinary democratic achievement.

That people can feel not only free, but comfortable, no matter what their family background, race, ethnicity, or religion, is a unique achievement in human history.

In *Who Prospers?*, an important book by Lawrence Harrison, the author asks why North America prospered while Latin America didn't. He lists a number of reasons. Among them is what he calls "familism." In Catholic Latin America, as opposed to Protestant North America, people had felt that they could trust only members of their family, not the stranger. In the United States, on the other hand, blood ties were less important than anywhere else on this planet.

That doesn't mean family didn't mean much in America. But it did mean, for example, that if you wanted to start a business, it didn't have to be with your son or your brother-in-law. As I read Harrison, I thought about Iraq today. Saddam Hussein's tyranny is built largely on clans and relatives. They are the only people he can trust. The head of internal security, Iraq's official torturing agency, is related to Saddam, and so on. It has been like this throughout most of the world—but not in the United States. In the United States, thanks largely to the Protestant tradition, the individual was sacrosanct.

## Individual Responsibility

Along with this individualism came individual responsibility: Just as I am rewarded for my good behavior, I am accountable for my bad behavior. This belief was a result of the individualism just described and of the Judeo-Christian ethic that also animated the founders of this country. Essential to Judaism and Christianity is the notion that you are accountable for your behavior—to God, ultimately.

This has been under attack. I remember reading about a liberal Reform rabbi whom the *Los Angeles Times* quoted as saying that "God is not judgmental." Now, that is a quite remarkable statement for a rabbi. If Judaism taught anything, it is that God judges all people all the time. Indeed, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, is also called *Yom Ha-Din*, the Day of Judgment. For on this day, God judges not only each Jew, but every human on Earth.

According to Maimonides, the codifier of Jewish law, one of the thirteen principles of Judaism is that there is reward and punishment for human behavior. In other words, we are responsible and accountable for what we do. I often imagine a modern-day, responsibility-denying liturgy on Yom Kippur. Instead of reciting the long list of sins contained in our traditional liturgy, we would say, "For the sin of my society for making me do this; for the sin of my socioeconomic environment for making me do that...in fact, God, please understand that I am not personally responsible for any sin that I committed. There is no such thing as personal sin, only social injustice, so I do not even know what I'm doing here. I think I'll go home and eat."

American individualism and the Judeo-Christian notion of personal accountability gave us the extraordinary nation that we built here.

## The Death of Stigma

One source of the onslaught against personal responsibility and accountability is secularism. As a secular individual in a secular, multi-ethnic society, to whom will I be accountable? Without a religious code, a religious community, a God, or a homogeneous secular ethnic community, to whom am I responsible? Obviously, only to the authorities—but what if I can elude the authorities?—and to myself.

In America today, much of society holds that we are responsible only to ourselves. We have interiorized everything: We—nothing outside of us—and how we *feel*—not how we behave—are all that matter in assessing us. As a result, we are witnessing the death of a very important socializing tool—stigma.

A *New York Times* article several years ago reported that the out-of-wedlock birth rate in Harlem was 89 percent. But what was most remarkable about the article, especially considering its source, was that it gave as one of the reasons for this high illegitimacy rate the lack of stigma over being a single mother.

The lack of stigma is by no means only applicable to inner-city black life. It has become almost universal. Do something bad today, and not only do you not suffer stigma, you may become a national media star. The murderer of John Lennon has been interviewed on one of the most respectable national television interview shows. Tonya Harding is becoming a movie actress. Kids are trading O.J. Simpson trading cards.

Stigma means personal accountability to society's standards. It is society's way of declaring something wrong without sending you to prison. In lieu of laws, we have stigma.

Of course, stigma, too, can have a terrible side. It can be misapplied. For example, people used to suffer stigma for seeing a psychiatrist. But the answer to wrongly applied stigma is not the abolition of stigma; it is correctly applied stigma. Unfortunately, however, when something important is done wrong, instead of doing it right, people often drop it. That is what has happened with religion. Many people, aware that much evil has been done in the name of religion, have concluded that religion is unnecessary. But that is no more appropriate a response than dropping medicine is the appropriate response to Nazi doctors having performed horrific experiments without anesthetics on human beings. The fact that there are evil doctors means that we must rid ourselves of evil doctors, not that we must rid ourselves of medicine. The fact that there are people who murder in the name of God means that we must teach goodness in the name of God, not get rid of God and religion. The fact that stigma was often misapplied does not mean we can do away with stigma.

## **Responsibility Only to Self: Feelings over Behavior**

Without accountability to an outside authority or standard, and without stigma, the only remaining responsibility is to self. Self—which may have once meant one's conscience but now simply means one's feelings—has become for many people the one standard of behavior: If I feel good, the act is good. I have no accountability to anyone or anything but my feelings.

I'll never forget how in the 1960s, when I was in high school, one day I picked up the *New York Post*, which at the time was excerpting a book titled, I believe, *How To Be An Assertive Woman*. That day's lesson was for a woman to go into as many stores as possible and ask for change of a \$20 bill. The point was that though you do not need the change, asking for it will teach you how to make demands on people. I wondered at the time: What if many women followed this? Wouldn't that annoy a great many people who work in stores? But it didn't matter to the author of this book. The fact that you would drive storekeepers crazy didn't matter. What mattered is that you are feeling good about yourself. You, the new assertive woman, only have to answer to yourself.

The incident I have most often cited to illustrate the rise in feelings-based values happened to my oldest son. Once, when he was two years old, a five-year-old bully walked over and threw him to the ground. The bully's mother frantically ran over to her son, held him, and said, "What's troubling you, darling?"

I know nothing about this woman, but of one thing I was certain—that she attended graduate school. I am certain of this because hers was a learned response. Most human beings would have yelled at their child “What are you doing?” and probably would have punished the child. You need many years of an American liberal arts education to learn that the proper response to a bully is to ask the bully what is troubling him.

“What’s troubling you?” means that your feelings, not your actions, are what are most important.

We monitor personal feelings more than personal behavior. This completely undermines personal responsibility for the obvious reason that personal responsibility means responsibility for our *behavior*. Therefore, the more we preoccupy ourselves with monitoring our feelings and motives, the less we will be concerned with personal responsibility. This exaggeration of the importance of feelings was recently manifested by film director Oliver Stone, who was quoted in *The New Yorker* in August 1994 as saying that the difference between thinking about murder and committing murder is “not major.”

I suspect that I am not alone in caring far more about how people *act* toward me than how they *feel* about me. We care about how our closest friends and relatives feel about us. But concerning the rest of humanity, we only care how they treat us. If a waiter is nice to me only because that’s his job, that’s fine. I do not expect to be loved by waiters. If deep down he doesn’t particularly care if I “have a nice day” but acts toward me as if he does care, that’s fine; it adds to the level of decency in society. I much prefer it to a waiter who acts true to his feelings—“You know, frankly, sir, I can’t stand you and all the other people who come into this restaurant and who make much more money than I do.”

The fact is that we rarely care about others’ feelings; we care about their behavior.

The primacy of motives and feelings, though, is an important characteristic of modern liberal thought. That is why Marxism and socialism have had such a better reputation in modern, secular, liberal life than capitalism. Capitalism is rooted in selfish motives. Socialism is rooted, for the most part, in idealism, even perhaps in altruism. Yet, capitalism has produced far more altruistic societies than socialism and Marxism. “To each according to his needs, from each according to his ability” is far more noble sounding and beautifully motivated than “the profit motive.” I learned from the capitalism/Communism difference not to judge motives, but to judge behavior.

Yet, we have raised a generation to value and monitor their feelings rather than their behavior. High school seniors all over the country, like Oliver Stone, believe that what you feel is almost no different from what you do. I have repeatedly asked them this question: Imagine two wealthy men, equally wealthy in every way. Each is approached by a woman whose daughter has cancer. The woman explains that without more money she cannot afford an operation that will save her daughter’s life. Upon hearing the woman’s story, one of the men began to cry and, in the midst of his tears, gave the woman a dollar. The other man did not cry. In fact, he had another appointment and therefore couldn’t even stay to hear the woman’s entire story. But being a religious person who felt obligated to the biblical law of tithing, he gave the woman fifty dollars. “Who,” I ask the groups, “did a better thing?” Overwhelmingly, students answer, “The one who gave the dollar, because he gave from his heart.”

It is a profound illustration of how behavior has come to matter less than feelings. And since only feelings matter, how can you be responsible for your behavior?

