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517

Moral
Reflections
On Life
Inside the Beltway

By Edwin J. Feulner, Jr., Ph. D.



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Moral Reflections On Life Inside the Beltway

By Edwin J. Feulner, Jr., Ph.D.

As you may know, the Beltway is the circular interstate highway that goes around Washington, D.C. Washington is completely contained therein, sort of like Disney World. Also like Disney World, Washington frequently operates on pure fantasy, and so some of us consider it the world's largest theme park. In Washington terms, you here in Michigan are outside the Beltway. Congratulations to you all.

Morality in Washington

My work is certainly cut out for me this evening. My topic is "Moral Reflections on Life Inside the Beltway." As you might imagine, this is not an easy topic. If you stood in the well of the House of Representatives and proclaimed, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," you would be buried immediately under a barrage of rocks. Such is the way Washington sees itself.

The Baltimore newspaperman H.L. Mencken defined conscience as that little voice inside you that tells you when someone's looking. So let's talk about the conscience of Washington and begin with three not untypical examples of Washington morality—one personal, one political, and one policy-related.

Now, so that you will not fall into what John Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress* called the Slough of Despond, let me assure you I will eventually emerge from this lecture optimistic and upbeat. If I didn't have hope for Washington, I would not be the head of a public policy think tank located only two blocks from the U.S. Capitol.

I'd like to start not by quoting a fellow conservative but by quoting Meg Greenfield, the liberal editorial page director of the liberal *Washington Post*. You might be surprised to find that I totally agree with her on something. She recently wrote about two current congressmen from Massachusetts who a number of years ago were found to be having sex with male congressional pages. The House Ethics Committee initially administered only the mildest of rebukes: a mere reprimand.

Quoting from her editorial: "The 'reprimand' was upgraded to the stronger term 'censure,' over much defensive complaint in the chit-chat of the capital that these were after all 17-year olds, only barely underage, and sexually active and that it was all very complicated." She goes on, "I remember thinking then that if congressmen having sex with underage children who are in their custody as junior employees is not where you draw the line, then there really is no line."

Where is the line in Washington? I suppose I could also ask, "Where is the line in Massachusetts?" since the citizens there keep reelecting the two gentlemen to office.

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Next, a political example. Right before the November elections former President Reagan released a letter to the American people explaining that he had Alzheimer's Disease. It was a very moving, heartfelt letter. I know people who cried when reading it. Mrs. Reagan recently was telling a friend of mine that she was so proud of the letter, which her husband wrote all by himself. She said they were receiving tens of thousands of letters from people thanking them for their courage in facing up publicly to this disease. The Reagans were absolutely overwhelmed by the outpouring of support.

It was not universal, however. Not long after the November election, Tony Coelho, the former congressman who was forced to resign his seat for questionable financial dealings but who was the leading advisor to the Democratic Party on the fall races, said something that took even me aback—and I thought I'd heard it all. He said that the Democrats had been gaining momentum heading toward the election until Reagan released that letter, implying that the timing was some kind of Republican scheme and thus giving one of the worst excuses for an electoral loss that I've ever heard.

Chesterton said that morality, like art, consists in drawing the line somewhere. Where is the line in Washington?

Finally, my third example—this one dealing with morality and public policy. And I'll lead into it with a joke that's going around Washington. A banker, an electrician, and a politician were taking an IQ test. One of the questions was: "What term would you use to describe the problem that results when outflow exceeds inflow?"

The banker wrote "overdraft." The electrician wrote "overload." And the politician wrote, "What problem?"

That answer is basically what has prompted a nationwide outcry for a balanced budget amendment. James Q. Wilson, the well-known professor of management and public policy at UCLA, recently wrote an interesting piece in the *Wall Street Journal* calling the amendment a bad idea whose time has come. But in the course of his article he noted the objections to the amendment that many in the Congress are raising: Couldn't Congress just cook the books, as it frequently does, and simply comply with the letter but not the purpose of the amendment? How will the amendment be enforced? What's the court going to do—send U.S. Marshals to arrest the budget committees?

Let me quote Professor Wilson here: "[N]otice what they are saying: You cannot trust us to do what you, the public, wants. Your amendment will not give us backbone. We will evade and cheat. Therefore, do not enact such an amendment so that we can ignore your will with complete impunity."

Now those examples I just gave happen to involve Democrats; I'm sure I could come up with some Republican examples. But the point is—where is the line in Washington?

A Morality Based on Belief in God

Well, I know where the line should be. It is where the line should also be here in Michigan and throughout the United States. But it is a line that does not get much coverage in our nation's capital because it is theological and thus too uncomfortable.

Rabbi Daniel Lapin, the president of an organization that unites Jews and Christians who seek to restore a more traditional vision to our culture and politics, gave a lecture at The Heritage Foundation last year. He said that his father, who was also a rabbi, used to encourage him as a child to repair all the broken timepieces around the house. Inevitably, this involved taking the pieces apart and confronting what appeared to be hundreds of little

cogs and wheels. One day he asked his father, "Why do you make me persist in these futile endeavors?" His father said, "I'm glad you asked that. I want you to notice something, and I want you always to remember this: while there are many ways to put the clock back together, only one way works."

Rabbi Lapin's point was basically that our society only works when based on principles and truths derived from God. As a Catholic, I, too, believe that all morality ultimately is grounded in the reality of God. But what does that have to do with Washington?

Without a morality based on the laws of God, good and evil, right and wrong will be defined in terms of the interests of whomever is doing the defining, such as the National Endowment for the Arts. Morality then simply becomes what those with purse or power say it is.

In his play "Forty Years On," the British humorist Alan Bennett has a fellow say, "Have you ever thought, Headmaster, that your standards might perhaps be a little out of date?" The headmaster says, "Of course they're out of date. Standards are always out of date. That is what makes them standards."

God's standards may be out of favor but never out of date. So while the rest of my talk will be secular, its underpinnings are theological because morality draws its meaning and force from an eternal God. And I mention this because I think it is essential that theological arguments be raised more openly and frequently in our public discourse. And I thank the Acton Institute for all it is doing in this regard.

Now, at the risk of making you think I'm going to go on as long as President Clinton, everything I've said up to now is a preface. Because the swirl of specific ethical accusations, misbehavior, investigations, and maneuverings that we've been discussing so far are minor. Washington right now is in the midst of a much larger moral debate than that over book contracts or gifts from lobbyists. The real debate is over the very morality on which government policies have been based for the past several decades. Since the outcome affects 250 million Americans, it is far more profound than the personal ethics of 535 members of the Congress. This is what the press fails to recognize as it salivates over the latest ethical charge and countercharge.

The Current Debate

I think the President unwittingly framed the debate in his State of the Union speech six weeks ago. As you may recall, President Clinton returned to the theme he used during his presidential campaign. He called for a New Covenant. As Father Sirico will attest, the original Covenant was between God and the Hebrew people. God promised that if they worshipped Him alone and obeyed His commandments, He would accept them as His own people and give them the blessings of land, prosperity, and children. Now, what I can't quite figure is this: By calling for a New Covenant, is the President suggesting that government take the place of God in the analogy? In other words, if the people accept the government as master and lord, the government will then provide for the people? This certainly is the traditional liberal bargain. But as a conservative, I suggest we keep the original Covenant and forget the President's. I do, however, praise the President for returning biblical references to presidential discourse, as was once common in this country.

But this issue of the role of government and its effect on the American people—on their sense of responsibility, their self-esteem, their behavior—is *the* central issue in the debate now taking place in Washington.

Ever since the days of the Great Society, liberalism has been deleting morality from our national debate. Crime, poverty, illegitimacy, drugs, unemployment, and so forth became purely economic and social problems. It simply wasn't proper to make moral judgments on others' lives or circumstances. And what has been the result?

Bill Bennett, who is a Heritage Distinguished Fellow and author of the best-selling *Book of Virtues*, has created the Index of Leading Cultural Indicators, which measures the nation's behavioral trends. It shows substantial social regression in America over the past three decades. For example, violent crime has increased more than 500 percent, illegitimate births by 400 percent.

Take illegitimate births. The President in his State of the Union speech proposed undertaking a new federal program through the schools to reduce teen pregnancies. Columnist Charles Krauthammer says that in addition to driver's ed and drug ed, schools will now have "preg ed." He accurately describes what will happen, "For a few minutes a week the federal government through some teacher will urge young girls and boys not to have kids. Yet that same federal government will through its policies be saying every day to every teenage girl in the country: Have a child, make sure it is out of wedlock, make sure you have no job or prospects, and we will then guarantee you a monthly check, free medical care, and (under the proposed Clinton welfare plan) two years' worth of job training and child care, also free."

My friends, what has happened is quite clear.

The government has destigmatized illegitimacy and made it morality-free. Gertrude Himmelfarb, in her new, highly praised book, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, writes, "Stigmas are the corollaries of values. If work, independence, responsibility, respectability are valued, then their converse must be devalued, seen as disreputable."

Another example: Under the program known as SSI, Supplemental Security Income, the government provides a minimum income to the poor who are blind, elderly, or disabled. Fine. But over the years, the term "disabled" has come to include alcohol and drug abuse. So what is the result? Well, this may surprise you, but right now in the United States, about a quarter of a million drug addicts and alcoholics receive a taxpayer-funded check of \$458 a month with which to sustain their addictions. They also receive free medical care. The rules say they are supposed to seek treatment but fewer than ten percent do. To top it off, the government being the government, there is sometimes a delay in processing claims; so the abusers can receive lump sums upwards of \$20,000 with which to finance their binges.

To show how mixed-up the morality of the government has become: For those who remain addicts and alcoholics, the checks continue to roll in, and they are rewarded. Those who free themselves from their so-called disability, on the other hand, have their money and medical care cut off and thus are punished. The point is, neither should be getting paid. As Dr. Himmelfarb points out, the Victorians would not have labeled such alcohol and drug abuses as "disabilities." The Victorians would have called them by their true and rightful name: "vices." The U.S. government, on the other hand, has elevated vices into disabilities and then subsidized them.

And what happens when you subsidize something? You get more of it. And that is one reason our social problems get progressively worse. There's a story I like about the mayor of New York, Fiorello LaGuardia. In the midst of ranting and raving at one of his department heads, he yelled, "If you were any dumber, I'd make you a commissioner." It's not a very admirable thing to admit, but that's sometimes the way I feel about government social plan-

ners. I believe that the conduct of government is not just devoid of common sense; it is too frequently immoral; it is too frequently destructive to the very society it is supposed to strengthen.

Another moral question for the government: health care. Now, you say, either people are sick or they are not sick, what does morality have to do with it? Well, what I'm talking about is behavior. For example, I've slimmed down quite a bit in recent months. It had reached the point that my wife finally said to me, "Ed, you should get in shape." I said, "Round is a shape." But I then made a behavioral choice to change my dietary habits and get on that instrument of modern torture known as the treadmill.

Dr. Kenneth Prager, a pulmonary physician at the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in New York, has written recently on the topic of a mother's moral behavior as it affects the infant mortality rate. He says that the further you get from the ivory towers the more you realize that quality and access of medical care matter less to health than does individual behavior. He draws upon a study reported in the recent issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that found that between 1978 and 1985 the infants of immigrant women in California had significantly lower mortality rates than did those of nonimmigrant women. The immigrants, however, had higher indexes of poverty, unemployment, welfare dependency, and late prenatal care than did their American counterparts.

Why then did the American mothers have a higher infant mortality rate? Because the American mothers had more sexually transmitted disease and more alcohol and drug abuse than did the foreign-born mothers. The authors of the study found that the infants were harmed more by the unhealthy *behavior* of the American mothers than by the poverty and late prenatal care of the immigrant women.

Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot paper over immoral behavior with federal dollars. We cannot spend our way to healthy lives, educational excellence, equal opportunity, stable families, economic prosperity, or any other worthy goals of our society. Yet this has been the basis of liberal government for the past 30 years.

Personal Responsibility versus Government Responsibility

Don Eberly, who has edited a book called, *Building a Community of Citizens*, makes a very interesting point. He says that the mistake of the Democratic majority in the Congress was believing that it could create the good society by merely building government up. He says the danger for the current Republican majority may be in believing it can recreate the good society by merely tearing government down. Now I guarantee you political reality and the special interests will prevent that. But his main point is, "If we are to recover as a society, the 21st Century will have to recover a vision of man bearing inherent moral value and moral agency."

I believe this in part depends on government allowing—which in some situations means forcing—people to redevelop a sense of personal responsibility for their own behavior.

Dennis Prager, the talk show host, recently gave a lecture at Heritage on personal responsibility and told a revealing story about his son. When the boy was two years old, a five-year-old bully walked over and threw him on the ground. The bully's mother frantically ran over to her son, held him and said, "What's troubling you, darling?"

Prager said, "I know nothing about this woman, but of one thing I'm 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 the proper response to a bully is to ask the bully what is troubling him.”

Ladies and gentlemen, the way our government responds to social problems is a learned response based on liberal theories totally unconnected to common sense and traditional morality. Morality becomes based on vague feelings and compassions rather than on standards of behavior. This is why the role of victim has reached cult status in our country.

Just last month in the Washington area a man was released from prison. Seventeen years ago when he was 15, he killed two police officers. He became a local cause célèbre and a political symbol. The liberal establishment in effect put their arms around him and said, “What’s troubling you, darling?” At his release, although fortunately expressing his remorse to the families of the slain officers, he went on to say in the perfect diction of victimology, “Yes, I killed, but I have also been killed within.”

The national press, the regulatory bureaucracy, and the congressional apologists for the special interests have furthered such nonsense. Every special interest group in the capital has its own special pain or burden. Criminals are the victims of the socio-economic-legal system. Unwed teenage mothers are the victim of sexual ignorance or a lack of condoms. Small farmers are the victims of the large agribusinesses that happen to provide us with the most inexpensive food prices in the world. Consumers who scald themselves on hot coffee or choke on french fries are the victims of McDonald’s cruel negligence.

The victims of choice in recent weeks have been Big Bird and Barney, behind whom the public broadcasting welfare artists are hiding. Big Bird and Barney are in danger of having their free ride derailed by that mean Republican Congress. Unfortunately it’s hard to be a victim when you’ve generated billions of dollars in private profits and your nest has been well-feathered at the taxpayer’s expense.

About the only group left that hasn’t reached victimhood status is the white male, and he may be next. The January 13 edition of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* has an article entitled, “Coping with the Alienation of White Male Students.” The female author writes, “Despite limited resources, colleges...have a responsibility to determine whether white men, like women and members of minority groups, require special support services.” She also recommends symposia, lectures, and discussions addressing the white-male experience and grievance procedures for white men who complain about sexual harassment or racial discrimination. Now I would bet, if you asked the average white, male college student what kind of special support services he desired, he would reply, “A six-pack.”

An appropriate response.

The tragedy of Washington turning everyone into victims is that it demeans those who truly do suffer. It trivializes genuine human need and I believe in the long run destroys compassion for our fellow man. It distracts government from those areas where needs are real. All this to me is immoral.

Morality’s New Respectability

Why am I optimistic? Because, I am delighted to say, morality is gaining a new respectability in our nation’s capital. I’m talking about the growing recognition by opinion leaders in the Congress and the press that government programs should require certain standards of moral behavior from those who benefit. This is a concept in opposition to the prevailing operating principle known as entitlement. And I predict most entitlements eventually will go the way of a previous entitlement—the divine right of kings.

I can also see a growing recognition in Washington that the human condition is influenced by elements beyond the flow of tax dollars. Columnist William Raspberry even wrote last month that he was increasingly struck by the discovery that the most successful social programs are those that are driven—even if only tacitly—by moral or religious values.

I don't think that surprises Father Sirico.

But these attitudes are getting much more attention and press coverage than they did just one year ago. In the past, even questioning the moral basis of welfare entitlements or those racial entitlements known as affirmative action and minority set-asides would have been deemed right wing heresy or worse. But things are being discussed in the papers, on the airwaves, and in the hearing rooms of the Capitol that were politically taboo only a few years ago. Today, the press can ignore conservative, moral arguments only at the risk of being journalistically inept.

If you don't mind my saying so, a lot of the credit should go to Heritage scholars like Robert Rector, whose work has done much to advance the current welfare debate. Credit should go to organizations like the Acton Institute that have sprung up to promote the free exchange of ideas. Credit, of course, must be given to a new majority in the Congress that is not afraid to reexamine the very fundamentals of the way government operates. And needless to say, credit must be given to the frustrated American people who voted for change last November.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am truly optimistic.

In the 18th century, we experienced a religious revival in the colonies known as the Great Awakening. It was a reaction against the secularization of society. I am not here to report that Washington is experiencing a Great Awakening, but I do believe an awakening *is* underway inside the Beltway. This awakening also is a reaction against the secularization of society in that it focuses on the abandonment of moral standards by its institutions and its people. This is a debate that can change the current moral premises of government itself. It is a debate that can bring the actions of the government back into line with the values of the American people.

Conclusion

I want to close by quoting one of the architects of the Great Society, John Gardner, who was LBJ's Secretary of what was then called the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. I want to quote him because this time I agree with what he says. He wrote, "A nation is never finished. You can't build it and leave it standing as the pharaohs did the pyramids. It has to be recreated for each new generation."

I believe we *can* recreate our nation for each generation so that we can meet the changing world. But we must remain grounded in our founding values and in their abiding morality. That is what the American people demanded last November. That is the meaning of the great moral debate currently raging in Washington.

And so, as someone who spends his life *inside* the Beltway toiling for a return to conservative values, I say thank you to all of you *outside* the Beltway who have made this debate possible.