

Reflections

Lawrence P. Grayson

AMERICA'S MORAL UNCERTAINTY

The initial actions that were taken to found America were deemed morally right because, as stated in the Declaration of Independence, they were in accord with “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” The ends that were sought – to establish a government that derives its powers from the consent of the governed, with equality before the law, and which would secure for its citizens their unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness -- were moral ones, based on a belief in a Supreme Creator and the God-given dignity of the individual. These beliefs constituted a public philosophy which the nation’s people understood, agreed with, and when required were willing to support even at great personal and communal sacrifice.

This public philosophy, which held that there is a law above those of the government and the sovereign people, provided a norm for public and private action which promoted, facilitated and protected America’s freedom and democratic institutions. It served the country well through many difficulties and crises, from the darkest days of the nation’s struggle for independence, to those of the Civil War, to America’s engagement in World Wars I and II, through periods of significant economic inflation and great depression, through the turmoil of rapid, large-scale immigration, and in the hours of chaos following the assassinations of several presidents. As the country became the world’s strongest nation, militarily and economically, however, the communal sense of purpose lessened. A focus on material gains, the secularization of the public sphere, the disavowal of the nation’s Judeo-Christian roots, and the attempt to have personal freedom without responsibility have torn apart America’s public philosophy. It is being replaced by an emphasis on survival and self-gratification.

These aims are not worthy of the world’s leading nation. They are more individualistic than communal, and do not provide a solid basis for allowing the nation to respond coherently to the threats it currently faces, nor possibly even for the nation to survive when faced with a determined enemy with a higher unifying purpose. Without a strong commitment to a public philosophy among the people, the country’s leaders do not have a clear basis for making sound policy decisions, especially when the issues have moral overtones. Can the desire for survival or economic growth or self-gratification be enough to answer questions such as: Does America have an obligation to promote democracy around the world? Should U.S. troops be sent to aid a foreign country in its internal struggles for freedom? Should a tax-supported, universal health care system be created? When does welfare become counterproductive and enervate personal initiative? What type of information should the government collect to protect our freedom without impinging upon personal privacy? Should the U.S. borders be totally open? Is the enemy of our enemy our friend? When there is not a clear communal philosophy based on objective moral standards, our leaders can neither lead nor defend the nation effectively.

There is a great deal of ferment in the world that is being agitated by a variety of militant groups, often operating with state support and with the encouragement of religious leaders. These militants view America and the West as decadent, as promoting life styles that are immoral, as focusing on temporal gratification rather than living according to a higher law.

Islamofanaticism, a term describing the current threat, is serious and significant, but is not the root of our problems. If its partisans were destroyed tomorrow, the threat to the American way of life would still exist. We seem to view the “war on terrorism” in which we are engaged merely from a military and survival perspective, rather than from the fact that there appears to be a strongly-held aim behind the terrorism – to create a world order based on the religious law of Shariah. If we only militarily subdue the terrorist groups, the dissatisfaction that underlies their ability to spawn and recruit new members will remain. The outcome of the war on terrorism will not be determined by the side that can engage the greatest military force, but by the side that can win the hearts and minds of the most people in both camps with its beliefs and ideology.

Not having a clear national philosophy to which the public subscribes leads to political uncertainty and moral paralysis. History is full of examples of this state, which often results in appeasement in foreign affairs. In the 1930s, with the sufferings of the First World War still fresh in people’s memories, the European democracies did not act to prevent Adolf Hitler from rebuilding the German military, even though they foresaw the possibility of another major war. They were morally indecisive because their options required sacrifice. In 1938, Neville Chamberlain thought that he could placate Hitler and Benito Mussolini, and thus avoid a European war, by agreeing to some of their demands. In September, 1938, Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain, and Edouard Daladier of France signed the Munich Agreement which transferred to Germany the Sudetenland, a region that was part of Czechoslovakia. Six months later, Hitler broke the Agreement and the German Army seized the rest of Czechoslovakia bringing on World War II. Being unwilling to take strong action to prevent war, the European democracies were thrown into war.

The challenge for America is to strengthen the people’s commitment to a public philosophy, rooted in the Judeo-Christian beliefs upon which the nation was founded, that supports our democratic principles. We must recognize that there are objective moral truths that are not dependent on time or circumstances. We must once again be able to say, “We hold these truths” so that they can determine our aims and provide the norms for judging “right” and “wrong,” for determining what we should in principle oppose as well as what we should in principle support. With a widely-held, communal philosophy, the abstractions of our ideals can be transformed into operative policies that lead to consistent political action.

How do we recommit the nation to those Judeo-Christian beliefs? The answer is to begin with an army of one – one organization, one state council, one assembly, one council, one person. Let’s commit the Knights of Columbus and its members to lead that reinvigoration.



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