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“America’s Youth: A Crisis of Character”

Dan Coats, U.S. Senate (R-INDIANA)

Preview: *Sen. Dan Coats discusses a social challenge that is as urgent as any we face as a nation: the decline of values among our young. In his words, “this is a topic as pressing as the most sensational headlines, and a debate as old as classical philosophy—‘How is virtue passed from one generation to the next?’” Sen. Coats delivered this presentation at the Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, “As the Twig Is Bent: The Conflict Over Teaching Values in Our Schools” in March 1991.*

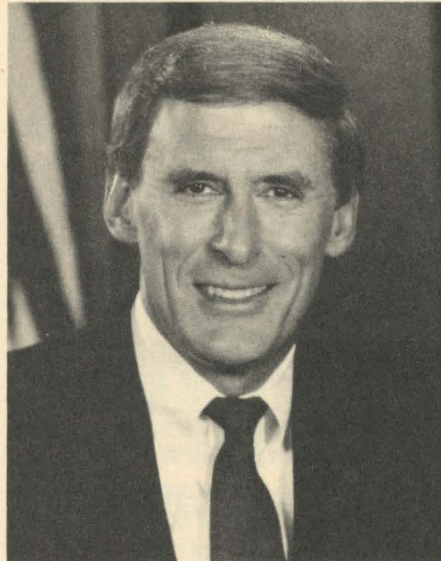
More than half a century ago, America was in the middle of a wrenching depression. One-third of our nation’s wealth vanished in a matter of months. Manufacturing declined 77 percent. One fourth of the labor force was left idle. Many cities could not afford to keep schools open. Twenty percent of New York school children were malnourished. At one point, 34 million men, women and children were without any income at all.

Yet in the depth of that hardship, with its soup kitchens, bank closings and hunger, Franklin Roosevelt could tell the nation in a radio address, “Our difficulties, thank God, concern only material things.”

It is a boast we can no longer make. From the perspective of history, this is an economic golden age. The world’s richest nation has come to the close of the richest decade in its history. We have just finished the longest peacetime economic expansion in a century. Well over 20 million new jobs have been created. Our stock market has more than tripled since 1982—adding \$2 trillion in new wealth.

Symptoms of the Crisis

But we have found that our difficulties go beyond the material. Roger Freeman of Stanford University argues that this



wealth has been accompanied by “an equally spectacular rise in all forms of crime, family abandonment, child neglect, suicide, widespread adoption of destructive behavior and an exponential growth of drug and alcohol abuse.”

We have found that economic indicators cannot measure the values held by our children, or the suffering felt by broken families. We have discovered that our growing GNP also includes massive prison construction to house a lost generation, drug counseling in elementary schools, suicide hotlines, teen pregnancy centers, and clinics for battered children.

Last year, a commission of educational, political, medical and business leaders met to examine the problems of American children. They issued a report called *Code Blue*, which came to a disturbing and unprecedented conclusion: “Never before has one generation of American teenagers been less healthy, less cared for, or less prepared for life than their

parents were at the same age.”

The evidence is only hidden from the blind. I sit on the Senate committee that deals with children and families. I sat on a similar committee in the House of Representatives, and I’ve seen the parade of pathologies—they are unending and increasing:

- Suicide is now the second leading cause of death among adolescents, increasing 300 percent since 1950.
- Teen pregnancy has risen 621 percent since 1940. More than a million teenage girls get pregnant each year. Eighty-five percent of teenage boys who impregnate teenage girls eventually abandon them.
- The teen homicide rate has increased 232 percent since 1950. Homicide is now the leading cause of death among 15 to 19 year-old minority youth.
- One in four young black males in America is either in prison or under court supervision.
- Every year substance abuse claims younger victims with harder drugs. A third of high school seniors get drunk once a week. The average age for first-time drug use is now 13 years old.

The *Code Blue* report made an essential point: the challenges to the health and well-being of America’s youth are not primarily rooted in illness or economics. Unlike the past, the problem is not childhood disease or unsanitary slums. The most basic cause of suffering, the report concluded, is profoundly self-destructive *behavior*. Drinking. Drugs. Violence. Promiscuity. A crisis of behavior and belief. A crisis of character.

Like a lot of well-intentioned panels, *Code Blue* had no idea what to do with its findings.

They diagnosed a cultural crisis. The solutions they eventually offered mainly centered on better health care. Former Education Secretary William Bennett commented, "In other words, *Code Blue* identifies a crisis of the spirit, a sickness of the soul, and it recommends aspirin, band-aids and a hall pass to the nurse."

This is not a problem that will be solved with money or clinics or medicine. It has deeper roots in hearts and souls. In the mainstream of youth culture, it is deeply disturbing. It leaves a legacy of broken lives. But at the extremes, it is frightening—with children who seem drained of conscience.

Last year, one Detroit prosecutor, reacting to rising juvenile violence, said that many children "don't seem to give a hoot about human life." Their nonchalant destruction can be macabre—and not only in celebrated cases like the Central Park jogger. A 14 year-old boy from Massachusetts killed a friend with a baseball bat, "just to see what it is like." Afterward, he walked to another friend's house, got into a snowball fight, and offered to show his pal the body. One psychiatrist who testified at the trial said that the boy was not conventionally insane. "He just doesn't internally know right from wrong. He knows the theory, but can't perform the action. He is morally handicapped."

In another case, a teenager in Florida basked in the attention of his arrest after he patiently watched a 3 year-old neighbor he pushed into the deep end of a swimming pool drown. The same was true for three teenage

kids. But they are part of the reality we face. And they led the *Washington Post* to conclude, "While the severity of actions ranges from simple cheating at school to pushing drugs to cold-blooded murder...the depth of the problem has reached a point where common decency can no longer be described as common. Somewhere, somehow...the traditional value system got disconnected for a disturbing number of America's next generation."

Time magazine asserts, "Ethics, often dismissed as a prissy Sunday school word, is now at the center of a new national debate." And the *New Republic* has editorialized about a "destructive sense that nothing is true and everything is permitted."

Why Values Are Essential

This crisis of values is not a marginal issue pursued by moralists and leftover puritans. It is central to the health and success of individuals. It is also central to the health and future of economic and social institutions. "Values and culture," argues William Bennett, "are not a sideshow—a distraction from the more 'real' and 'pressing' issues we face like, say, the capital gains cut and reducing the federal deficit. They are every bit as 'real'—indeed they are more real, more important, and have more impact on our lives."

Experts, for example, increasingly see values as central to our understanding of poverty and the urban underclass. It is certain that attitudes, beliefs and actions are even more

"What people do matters more than what is done to them."

This is an insight not limited to the poor. Every culture depends, from moment to moment, directly on individuals who will act with integrity. Keeping the law, respecting life and property, loving one's family, fighting for national goals, helping the poor, paying taxes—all these depend on individual virtues like courage, duty, loyalty, charity, compassion and civility.

In his Farewell Address, George Washington made the point, "virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government." British statesman Edmund Burke argued, "men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their own appetites. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there is without. It is ordained

"The character of our children is the leading indicator of our future as a culture."

in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters."

It is a central teaching of the American experiment that liberty depends, in a very direct way, on individual virtue. Historian Russell Kirk sums this up: "what gives a man dignity, and what makes possible a democracy of elevation, and what makes any society tolerable, and what gives just leaders their right to office, and what keeps the modern world from being *Brave New World*, and what constitutes real success in any walk of life, is private moral worth."

The character of our children is the leading indicator of our future as a culture. And this is the reason that when our children are sick of soul, there is no higher priority than to seek their healing.

British social critic C.P. Snow wrote, "civilization is hideously fragile and there's not much between us and the horrors beneath, just about a coat of varnish."

That varnish, it appears, has worn dangerously thin.

Relativism and the Road to Moral Confusion

How did we come to this grim and dangerous state of affairs? Ultimately, the crisis of character which afflicts our youth has roots in our intellectual culture. "Ideas have consequences," as both Richard

"We live in a century in which 'facts' are glorified while 'values' are assigned an inferior status as mere matters of opinion."

girls in New York who robbed and terrorized a 90 year-old woman and her 83 year-old sister in their apartment. After threatening to kill them and stealing \$300, the 16 year-old and the two 13 year-olds spent the money on clothes. On being arrested there was no sign of remorse.

These kind of tabloid shockers aren't, of course, a general commentary on American

important than reforms, policies and programs when it comes to escaping the poverty trap. Columnist William Raspberry writes:

"School reform cannot educate black children who equate academic exertion with 'acting white.'

"No jobs program will cure the income problems of people who believe that the 'chump change' rewards of entry level work are beneath them.

"No system of health care, no matter how freely available, will improve the health of people who persist in such risky behavior as drug abuse, bad eating habits or promiscuous sex.

"No turn around in the housing market, or low-income housing program, will deliver homeownership to people who refuse to save or who insist on having too many children.

About the author: In December 1988, shortly after being elected to a fifth term in the U.S. House of Representatives, Dan Coats was appointed to fulfill the Senate term of Vice President-elect Dan Quayle. In 1990, he won election to the same seat. A U.S. Army veteran and attorney, he is the Republican leader of the Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families. His daughter, Lisa, attended Hillsdale College. ▲

Weaver and Hillsdale College have sought to impress upon our nation's leaders. But we live in a century in which "facts" are glorified while "values" are assigned an inferior status as mere matters of opinion. We have seen the development of a militant relativism that dictates that it is impossible to prefer one value above another, since all conceptions of the good are equally subjective.

Rabbi and author Neil Kurshan observes, "When we begin to doubt the absolute goodness of God, or even His very existence, we are left with only ourselves as the final arbiters of morality. When values are no longer rooted in an absolute goodness, they become only as good as those who hold them. And without firm values, children become confused and anxious over the array of alternatives. If everything is of equal worth, the process of maturation becomes difficult."

Societal norms and social stigmas have taken a beating in the last few decades. Stabilizing beliefs have disappeared. What should we expect but moral confusion? "We laugh at honor," in C.S. Lewis' words, "and are shocked to find traitors in our midst."

Second, our pervasive popular culture has set itself against moral restraint and virtue.

Children are witnesses to more than 10,000 murders on television before the age of 18. It should be no surprise when some actually kill.

MTV provides an unending diet of seductive sexual images. It should be no shock that one in ten teenage girls gets pregnant each year.

Rape, aggression and violence are excused or encouraged by some rap music. It should be no wonder that kids caught for rape and murder show no remorse.

Columnist Charles Krauthammer, who began his career as a psychiatrist, comments, "As a psychiatrist, I used to see psychotic patients who, urged on by voices inside their heads, did crazy and terrible things. Now we have legions of kids walking around with the technological equivalent: 2 Live Crew wired by Walkman directly into their brains, proposing to 'bust and break your backbone. . . I wanna see you bleed.' Surprised that a whole generation is busting and breaking and bleeding? Culture has consequences."

"Our pervasive popular culture has set itself against moral restraint and virtue."

University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom paints a memorable image: "Picture a 13 year-old boy sitting in the living room doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphone or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over centuries by the alliance of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is pro-

vided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind. And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose . . . feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of sex or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. This description may seem exaggerated, but only because some would prefer to regard it as such. It is the youth culture, and there is now no countervailing nourishment for the spirit."

The Breakdown of Moral Instruction Through School and the Family

A third factor involves an odd paradox in which our schools have often set themselves against the virtue of students in their charge. In the last few decades, many districts adopted programs which said, in essence, "There is no right and wrong. We are going to throw out all these values and let children pick and choose between them." And they have done nothing but spawn a generation which is morally confused.

I recently saw the story of a high school values clarification class conducted by a teacher in Teneck, New Jersey. A girl in the class had found a purse containing \$1,000 and returned it to its owner. The teacher asked for the class's reaction. Every single one of her fellow students concluded the girl had been "foolish." Most of the students contended that if someone is careless, they should be punished. When the teacher was asked what he said to the students, he responded, "Well, of course, I didn't say anything. If I come from the position of what is right and what is wrong, then I'm not their counselor. I can't impose my views."

It's no wonder that J. Allen Smith, considered a father of many modern education reforms, concluded in the end, "The trouble with us reformers is that we've made reform a crusade against all standards. Well, we've smashed them all, and now neither we nor anybody else have anything left."

At the extremes of character breakdown, our schools have been transformed into correc-

tional facilities. Seventeen percent of our nation's teachers live with the fear of physical attack. Every month, 12 percent of high school teachers are threatened with violence. A government report concluded, "conflict, confrontation and carnage have replaced the 3 Rs in many of the nation's schools."

At Orr High School in Chicago, typical of

some city schools, all of the windows have been replaced by cloudy plastic. The parking lot is surrounded by a 15-foot wire mesh fence and kept locked during the school day. Six security guards patrol the halls. Armed policemen are posted on school property. Students must wear plastic ID cards and cannot move freely in the building.

"When we continue to initiate an education system void of standards," argues George Roche, "void of authority, void of responsibility, void of the ideal, is there really any question as to why the lives of our youth develop lacking moral standards, self-discipline or a sense of responsibility?"

Fourth, and most disturbingly, we have seen failures in the family itself. Many parents, obsessed with their own fulfillment, have lost the values of sacrifice and commitment. One Christian writer laments, "The family is no longer a 'we' but an exercise in mutual therapy for the self-centered egos of its members. If any of the members, parents or child, finds that the therapy is insufficient, it is free to leave." And parents *have* left in growing numbers. Only 39 percent of children born in 1988 will live with both parents until their 18th birthday. Half of all marriages end in divorce. In three out of every five divorces, children are involved.

One study found that, 18 months after a divorce, children have a rate of sudden, serious psychological problems comparable to "victims of natural disaster." Sixty-five percent of the children—who had been functioning well before the divorce—couldn't concentrate in school, couldn't eat or sleep properly, couldn't make friends, were depressed, withdrawn or hostile. Even ten years after a divorce, over 40 percent of these young people still had no set goals, a limited education and a sense of hopelessness about their lives. The study's author concludes, "Almost half of the children of divorce enter adulthood as worried, underachieving and sometimes angry young men and women."

Even when families remain intact, moral instruction is not automatic. A public school survey in Maryland showed that parents spent an average of 15 minutes a *week* in "meaningful dialogue" with their children—children who are left to glean whatever values they can from peers and TV.

I recently saw an article about day care on Capitol Hill. Because, among so many couples in Washington, both husband and wife work, they have set up their own day care center. A child is brought in at 7:00 each morning—just after he wakes up—and a parent will often pick him up after work at 8:00 p.m. or 9:00 p.m. each night—just after the child has gone to sleep. The center also provides day care for vacations and weekends—making it literally possible for a couple never to see their child awake.

There is something very wrong when children are treated as obstacles to parental self-fulfillment, or as consumer goods like a new BMW. It creates young people who later find themselves unable to form their own families. And this self-centered destruction of the family is not only an individual tragedy, it is a national crisis.

Helping Our Children Escape the Shadows

Well, this is a grim picture, admittedly focusing on the dark, not the light. There is plenty of encouraging news about American youth. But it is the darkness that seems to advance. And the question naturally arises: "How do we recover what we've lost?"

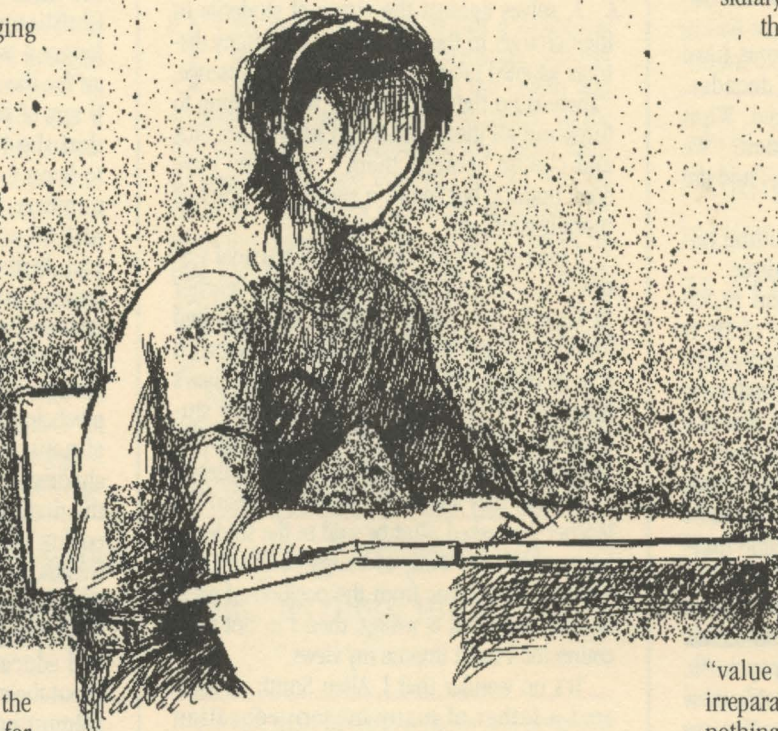
We can begin by acknowledging two important lessons from these decades of failure. First, character is not a set of beliefs to be clarified. It is not an ideology we adopt through reasoned argument. It is, above all, a set of habits. It cannot be summoned at a moment of crisis if it has been gradually squandered by years of compromise and rationalization. The only testing ground for the heroic is the mundane. The only preparation for that one profound decision which can change a life, or even a nation, is those hundreds and thousands of half-conscious, self-defining, seemingly insignificant decisions made in private. Edmund Burke wrote, "A man's habits become his virtue." Habit is the daily battleground of character.

When Oscar Wilde arrived for a visit to the United States in 1882, he was asked by customs officials if he had anything to declare. He replied: "Only my genius." Fifteen years later, alone and broken in prison, he reflected on his life of waste and excess. "I have been a spendthrift of my genius... I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character."

Second, we have learned that moral habit depends above all on clear, unequivocal rules and enforced discipline. "Moral education," Annette Kirk, one of the authors of *A Nation at Risk*, has written, "is at first *didactic* and only

later *dialectical*—able to consider the 'hard cases' and to examine theories and dilemmas as a purely intellectual undertaking." Furthermore, moral education cannot be successfully cultivated by the political process. While politics depends on individual character, it can do precious little to create it. Dr. Johnson observed, "How small, of all that human hearts endure/That part which kings or laws can cause or cure."

The church plays a crucial role in the cultivation of moral worth. Theologians and philosophers argue whether there can be reliable virtue without religion. But the fact remains that in American history, religion has been the foundation for private morality and



public virtue. The church is a community of character where virtue is taught and celebrated, where moral worth is installed through instruction and discipline. "Representative government," writes James Reichley of the Brookings Institution, "depends for its health on values that over the not-so-long run must come from religion."

But even more than in the church, it is in families that children learn the tools of economic success and moral restraint. It is in families that they learn honesty, self-respect, compassion and confidence. Families are the school of first instruction. When they fail, the effects ripple to every area and level of society. Our schools become minimum security facilities. Our playgrounds become shooting galleries. Welfare rolls and prison cells are filled. And a shadow is drawn across our future.

There is, simply put, no better way to foster virtue than to foster nurture. That must be our

first goal. And it should disturb us that we are headed in precisely the opposite direction. It is a sobering thought, as we abandon the traditional home, that, in the words of one anthropologist, "despite the enormous variety of societies, from Azandu to the Zulus, there never has been in all of human history a successful society without a nuclear family."

As growing numbers of families fail, even more pressure is put on schools. This is certainly not the ideal place for moral instruction. But the need is real. If a child's home life doesn't provide discipline and basic moral teaching, the schools may be his last best chance of receiving any of that at all. Patricia Graham, dean of Harvard's graduate school of education, argues, "The school's responsibility for forming character is subsidiary to that of the family and perhaps even the community. But any school that does not recognize the need for enhancement of character is inadequate."

What, realistically, can be done? First, at least, schools should do no harm. You can argue, for example, over exactly what hospitals should do. But at the very least they should not spread disease. When schools contradict home-taught morality by preaching relativism and

"value free" decision-making, they can do irreparable damage to young minds. Teaching nothing at all on the moral agenda is preferable to inculcating a rootless relativism. A school which is silent on moral truths has failed its students and made a disturbing moral statement of sorts. But at least it has not indoctrinated our children in an alien and destructive philosophy.

One thing we can agree on is to take greater pains to expose children to the moral imagination embodied in great literature. *Crime and Punishment*, *the Bible*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Lord Jim*—works like these expose the workings of moral reasoning, the consequences of sin, the necessity of virtue.

William Kirk Kilpatrick, the author of *The Psychological Seduction*, has written, "Moral education is not simply a matter of becoming more rational or acquiring decision-making skills. It has to do with vision, the way one looks at life... it follows that one of the central tasks of moral education is to nourish the imagination with rich and powerful images of

the kind found in stories, myths, poems, biography and drama. If we wish our children to grow up with a deep vision of life, we must provide a rich fund for them to draw on."

Third, there is the question of using schools to directly teach moral rules. Support for the idea is overwhelming. Parents of public school students want moral values taught in schools by a majority of 84 percent in one poll.

ting in the audience, responded loudly to a colleague who had been educated in Nazi Germany, "My God, I can see their brown shirts." She later said to the press, "This wipes out diversity and separation of church and state. It negates everything public schools stand for."

The superintendent of the Concord District backed her up: "It would be dangerous, sad

San Marcos instituted an innovative character education program offered by the Thomas Jefferson Research Center. Seventh graders were given classes on values. Eighth graders were taught about commitment and the family. Ninth graders were taught moral decision-making. The school principal's goal was simple: "We want students to know there is a difference between right and wrong."

In the two years that followed, teen pregnancies reduced to almost nil. Grade-point averages were significantly higher. Fewer discipline problems were reported. More students were on the honor roll. There may well have been other reasons for these changes. But results like these have gained character education a national hearing.

There is nothing more important to the future of free institutions than the preparation of young minds—equipped with a moral compass and disciplined by a demand for excellence. Our character is at issue, and our future is at stake.

Christian thinker Thomas Merton wrote, "Every man becomes the image of what he adores. He whose worship is directed to a dead thing becomes a dead thing. He who loves corruption rots. He who loves a shadow becomes, himself, a shadow." We have a responsibility to help our children escape from the shadows, for our sake as well as theirs. ▲

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Around the nation—in Baltimore, St. Louis, San Bernardino—school boards have been frightened by moral chaos among the young. And these districts have designed programs to help instill the basics of character in their students. But we have to prepare for a storm of opposition from the relativists who often influence public education. Concord, New Hampshire is a good example. During a state seminar on teaching values, one speaker talked of promoting Judeo-Christian culture. The vice president of the Concord school board, sit-

and boring to have one view of morality imposed on our people." When a proposal makes those kind of enemies, it must have some merit!

And in certain cases, the results of student behavior seem to have been very positive. A few years ago, San Marcos High School in California found that 178 unmarried girls admitted they were pregnant during the school year. That was 20 percent of the women on campus—one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the country.

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