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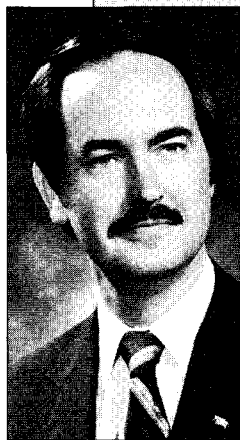
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## "The Sixties Are Dead: Long Live the Nineties"

by Cal Thomas  
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**A** copy-boy-turned-reporter at NBC for many years, Cal Thomas's network assignments ranged from White House coverage to stories on the space program, civil rights, Watergate, health care, and elections. Today, he is one of the most popular media commentators in the nation. He is a syndicated columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* whose weekly column appears in over 350 newspapers, the host of a radio show that airs on over 100 stations, and one of the featured guests on "Talk All-Stars" on the CNBC television network.



Mr. Thomas regularly appears on such programs as "Today," "Nightline," "Donahue," "Good Morning America," "Crossfire," "Larry King Live," and the network news. He is the author of eight books, including *The Death of Ethics in America*, *Uncommon Sense*, *Liberals for Lunch*, *A Freedom Dream*, and, most recently, *The Things that Matter Most*. ♣

*The decade of the 1960s is widely regarded as one of the most important eras in American history—a real watershed. Although it has persisted for more than three decades, Cal Thomas argues that the sixties' legacy was destructive and that it has finally died due to its own failures. What will take its place? He offers an optimistic prediction that foresees more consensus than conflict and a return to "an older, higher tradition" of "family, freedom, and faith." This lecture was delivered during Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "Newsmakers and Mythmakers: The Modern Media and Advocacy Journalism," last March.*

**I**f you slept through the sixties, you woke to a different America. It was the pivotal point of the recent past—an authentic decade of decision. It marked the beginning of a passionate social debate that still divides us. It changed ancient attitudes on matters both public and private. One sixties' radical with second thoughts, Peter Collier, has written, "The stones we threw into the waters of our world in those days caused ripples that continue to lap on our shores today—for better, and more often, for worse." No generation of Americans has ever heard more extravagant promises. Promises of revolution. Promises of utopia. Promises of ecstasy. Promises of justice. Here is a brief look at some of the other features of the sixties' ambitious agenda:

(1) *The promise to end poverty.* In 1962, President John F. Kennedy asked Congress for the creation of a "public welfare program" designed to "attack dependency, juvenile delin-

quency, family breakdown, illegitimacy, ill health, and disability." During the Great Society, these goals were expanded even further, and President Lyndon B. Johnson assured his fellow Americans, "The final conquest of poverty is within our grasp." This massive government effort led one wag to comment, "God is dead but fifty-thousand social workers have risen to take His place."

(2) *The promise of liberation from the traditional family.* In the

1960s, Betty Friedan mocked the life of a mother and homemaker as

consisting of "comfortable, empty, purposeless days" lacking any possibility for a woman to "grow and realize one's full potential." Children and marriage were represented as the sworn enemy of self-fulfillment. Distrust and suspicion were returned by the young: "Don't trust anyone over thirty" were the passwords for entry into the counter-culture. Jim Morrison, lead singer for the brash new musical group, the "Doors," influenced millions of young fans by always referring to his parents as "dead" even though they were still alive.

(3) *The promise of sexual freedom.* In 1966, Masters and Johnson cast the blinding light of research into the "dark corners" of human sexuality. Everything was measured, categorized, and revealed. Most Americans were surprised to learn what went on in suburban bedrooms—and kitchens and closets. The lesson drawn? It was less than profound: "Do your own thing." Meanwhile, the infamous Weathermen pursued their "smash monogamy" campaign. Many committed couples were harangued until they admitted their "political errors" and split apart. Marriage began to replace cohabitation as the unpardonable sin. The youth culture began to experiment with group sex and homosexuality out of a sense of political obligation, as well as a yearning to be trendy.

(4) *The promise of "pharmaceutical enlightenment."* Harvard University Professor Timothy Leary urged students in the *Psychedelic Reader* to "Tune in, turn on, drop out" as a surefire method to expand their mental horizons. Happiness and drug use became synonymous. And, of course, flouting the law and convention on the issue of drugs soon led to a

general disrespect for all law and convention.

(5) *The promise of progressive education.* On the sixties-style open campus, students were delighted to find more and more

courses without assignments, lectures, or grades. Universi-

ties began to abandon their most

basic mission

of providing liberal

arts undergraduate

education.

As sociologist Robert

Nisbet

explains, "The

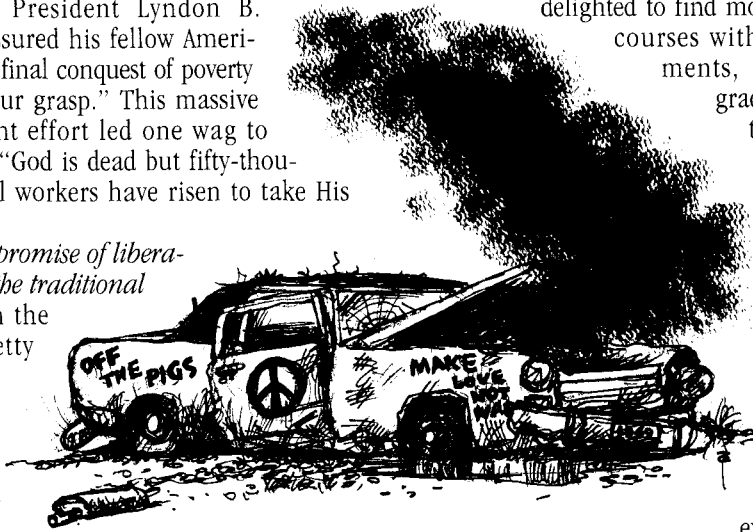
ideologies which gained entry into the academy in the sixties claimed that the fundamental intellectual principles of Western culture were illegitimate and must be overthrown. With that destroyed, terms like *truth, good, evil, and soul* could be discarded."

(6) *The promise of unrestrained expression.* "Little Richard's First Law of Youth Culture," named after a then-popular singer, set the agenda: Please kids by shocking their parents. Beyond popular culture, even "high culture" led by prestigious artistic figures threw off all convention in an effort to redefine the medium and in so doing opened the floodgates of nihilism and perversion in the name of "art."

(7) *The promise of God's death.* Radical activists and even once-conventional theologians sponsored an escape from traditional religion and morality in an attempt to create "new values" for a new generation. Some merely wanted to make the church seem "hip" and relevant; some desired to tear it down. Few demurred at all when Chicago Seven defendant and militant atheist Abbie Hoffman proclaimed, "God is dead, and we did it for the kids."

## Broken Promises

The attack on authority was frontal and heavy. Jim Morrison spoke for many when he said, "I have always been attracted to ideas that were about revolt against authority...I am interested in anything about revolt, disorder, chaos—especially activity that seems to have no meaning. It seems to me to be the road to freedom."



The mottoes of the time, charged with wild-eyed, unwashed intensity, tell the story of the sixties: "If you see something slipping, push." "Burn baby, burn." Ideas like personal honor, gentlemanly conduct, loyalty, duty, obligation, and the sacred were all disowned. The past was demolished, like a decaying, outdated historical landmark, to make way for a chrome and glass future.

The decade of the sixties was judged, in its own time, by the height of its aspirations. Today, it can be judged by the depth of its influence. When the evidence is weighed, the verdict is irrefutable: We have lived through the unfolding history of its utter failure. Promises and illusions were shattered like glass. Americans are left to walk carefully among the jagged shards.

To fight poverty, the government has spent beyond the wildest dreams of avarice—let alone Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, or Lyndon B. Johnson. For over three decades, we have conducted the greatest social experiment the world has ever seen with \$3.5 trillion in government funds. Yet poverty is still on the increase, deeply rooted as it is in fragmented families, and welfare is still a trap that eventually destroys the soul.

Feminist disdain for the family and the sexual revolution have given millions of women the chance to realize their full potential—of abandonment and poverty, that is—and has "liberated" countless children from the affection and care of their parents. The results for children are particularly disturbing, because their suffering has been uninvited and undeserved. The Census Bureau estimates, for example, that only 39 percent of children born in 1988 will live with both parents until their 18th birthday.

Other surveys suggest that over 40 percent of all American children have no set goals, a limited education, and a sense of hopelessness about their lives. It is no wonder that psychologist Judith Wallerstein concludes that almost the same number enter "adulthood as worried, underachieving and sometimes angry young

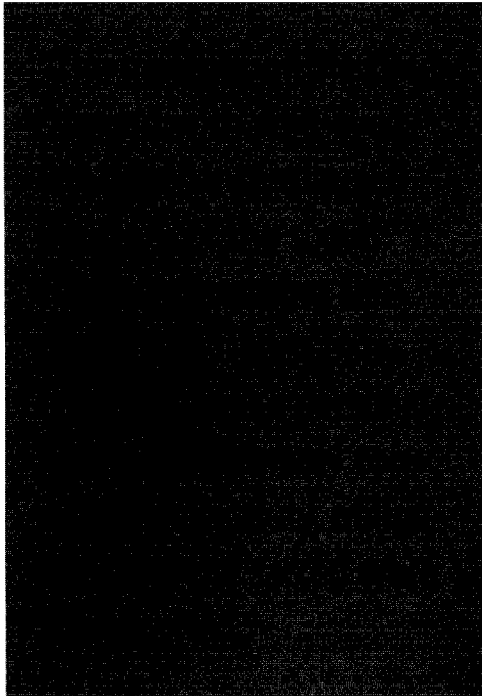
men and women." The doctrine of the dispensable two-parent family—so central to the sixties—turned out to be a lie. Those who embraced it have much to answer for; they have sacrificed too many children on the altar of their ideology.

Progressive education, designed to provide enlightenment, has generally left students entirely in the dark. At Vermont's Middlebury College, it is possible to take a class called "Popular Culture, Eroticism, Aesthetics, Voyeurism, and Misogyny in the Films of Brigitte Bardot." "Music Video 454," taught at California State University, uses the *Rolling Stone Book of Rock Video* as its only textbook and places students as extras in rock videos—for credit.

Is it any wonder that stories about the ignorance of college students have become clichés? Recently, a Harvard senior thanked his history professor for explaining World War I, saying, "I never knew why people kept talking about a *second* world war."

Those who once were keepers of the gateways of learning have little left to offer. Their fields have been impoverished by critical theories that reinterpret all knowledge in terms of political and economic power and exploitation. Since the sixties, college professors have taken up political causes as a profession, using the classroom to denounce falsehood and injustice while teaching that truth and justice are illusions. J. Allen Smith, the father of many modern education reforms, confessed: "The trouble with us reformers is that we have made reform a crusade against all standards. Well, we have smashed them all, and now neither we nor anyone else has anything left."

In regard to culture, theories that hate beauty and order have undermined meaning, value, and conscience. Whether it is popular culture or high culture, they have led to ever stranger sins and more startling obscenities. Each year requires more baroque perversions to



provoke society's jaded capacity for outrage. The National Endowment for the Arts, official arbiter of the avant garde, illustrates the change. In 1989, the NEA denied a modest request from the New York Academy of Art to provide young painters with skills in drawing the human figure. Susan Lubowsky, director of the NEA's visual arts program, explained, "Teaching students to draw the human figure is revisionist...and stifles creativity."

Recently, the distinguished sculptor Frederick Hart, who created "Three Soldiers" at the Vietnam War Memorial, applied for a grant to do a series of sculptures. To his surprise, the endowment turned him down. "The NEA," he said, "told me I was not doing art." Yet the NEA paid \$70,000 to fund a show featuring Shawn Eichman's "Alchemy Cabinet," displaying a jar with the fetal remains from the "artist's" own abortion. Around the same time, it authorized \$20,000 for a project in Lewiston, New York that was "to create large, sexually explicit props covered with a generous layer of requisitioned Bibles."

On the front line of the drug war, the news is even more grim. Everyone has seen the effect of drugs on the young, who are seldom more than a handshake away from any drug they can afford. The permissive treatment of drugs has spawned a violent subculture of gangs, guns, and random terror. It has squandered lives, talent, and hope in every school and every community.

The escape from religion and the triumph of secularism have left many Americans isolated, confused, and alone. They are disconnected from traditional sources of meaning, value, and love like the family and the church. Sociologists call them "loose individuals" who are free from traditional restraints, obsessed with self-fulfillment, but uncertain of whether anything makes much difference. They are sentenced, in the words of one writer, to "the dark little dungeon of the ego." Novelist George MacDonald once put it another way: "The one principle of hell is, 'I am my own.'"

The ultimate result is a genuine social crisis—a crisis, if you will, of cultural authority. How can we make any moral judgments? How can we draw dividing lines between sane and

insane, noble and base, beautiful and hideous? How can we know anything about living a good life? How can we cry for reform when "form" has no meaning? Peter Collier and another former sixties' radical activist, David Horowitz, conclude, "In the inchoate attack against authority, we have weakened our culture's immune system, making it vulnerable to opportunistic diseases. The origins of metaphorical epidemics of crime and drugs could be traced to the sixties, as could literal ones such as AIDS."

Where does this leave us? The promises of the decade of the sixties have been broken. Nearly every victory turned out to be a defeat. The revolution that was meant to solve every problem became *the* problem. If a cultural crimes trial were to be convened today, like the war crime trials of the past, the testimony of the victims would be damning. An abandoned child. An overdosed teenager. A trapped welfare mother. An ignorant student. A victim of venereal disease. Each could ask, "Where was *my* liberation?"

## A New Consensus on an Older, Higher Tradition

This is all deeply troubling. We have borne, and continue to bear, the brunt of the failures of a destructive generation. But there is ample room for hope and optimism. Those failures have provided an opportunity—precisely because they are obvious to everyone with eyes to see—to call for real reform. The terrible price we have paid for the sixties has become evident to more and more Americans on the left as well as the right. Some will still be bound to romanticize certain features of the sixties, but there is no longer any question that they were harmful.

In the process, an older, higher tradition has found some unlikely sympathizers. In just the last few years, Americans have turned a corner in the realm of ideas. This has left a trail of bent and broken orthodoxies, but it has led to some great and beneficial discoveries. We have discovered, first of all, that social science provides a wonderful tool for understanding ourselves. It has documented beyond a doubt

the importance of strong families and individual character—not just as moral ideals but as basic human needs. And, without flinching, it has documented the result when these things are absent in society.

Barbara Whitehead's widely remarked article, "Dan Quayle Was Right," in the *Atlantic* carefully recounts study after study in what one commentator called a "social-science saturation bombing about the harm that family dissolution is doing to children and to the social fabric." Ms. Whitehead makes the case, moreover, that illegitimacy is not a lifestyle choice but a form of adult behavior with profoundly destructive effects on the young. She also argues that no-fault fatherhood can cripple poor children faster than lead paint and that the two-parent home is the best defense against poverty, crime, and despair.

David Popenoe, a prominent sociologist at Rutgers University, has added, "Social science research is almost never conclusive. Yet, in three decades of work as a social scientist, I know of few other bodies of data in which the weight of evidence is so decisively on one side of the issue: For children, two-parent families are superior to single-parent and stepfamilies."

This shift in attitudes is best measured by what might be called the "Charles Murray indicator." A decade ago, Murray wrote in his controversial book, *Losing Ground*, that illegitimacy was crippling the poor and that welfare was subsidizing illegitimacy. In one typical review, he was condemned as a "heartless social Darwinist." Yet Murray reaffirmed the point recently in the *Wall Street Journal* and applied it to a growing white underclass. On this occasion, he received a personal note from President Clinton commending his profound analysis.

This change in public reaction reaches deep. Once Americans generally believed that mediocre education, welfare dependency, and increasing crime were technical problems with economic or legislative solutions. But that belief has now failed. In a groundbreaking article for the *Public Interest*, UCLA Professor James Q. Wilson says there is a "growing awareness that a variety of public problems can only be understood—and perhaps addressed—if they are seen as arising out of a defect of character formation." He concludes,

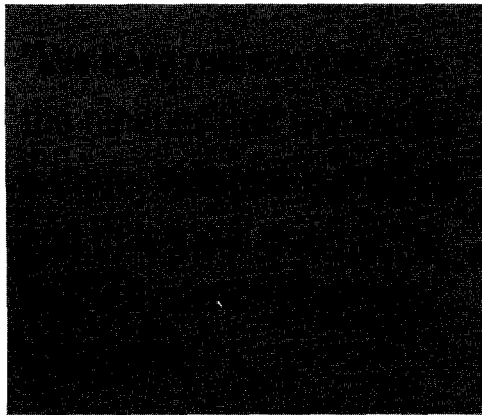
"In the long run, the public interest depends on private virtue."

This conversion is reluctant but real, especially in the media. It is something new and hopeful, for example, when Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* observes, "About 1.2 million children are being born annually in single-parent homes. Without mature males as role models (not to mention disciplinarians) they are growing up unsocialized—prone to violence, unsuitable for employment, and thus without prospects or hope." Or when political commentator David Broder argues, "The facts of social disintegration are so staggering, this is no longer a matter of ideological argument....It is no longer possible to pretend that the values by which people live their lives don't matter." Or when television mogul and People for the American Way founder Norman Lear writes, "We need to make room in the culture for a public discussion of our common spiritual life....We need to rediscover together what is truly sacred."

Charles Krauthammer of the *New Republic*, Michael Barone of *U.S. News*, and William Raspberry of the *Washington Post*, among others who can hardly be called traditional conservatives, have become articulate spokesmen for this new consensus in the media.

And this consensus has even begun to filter its way into our political life. In a State of the Union address, President Clinton said, "Our problems go way beyond the reach of government. They are rooted in the loss of values...and the breakdown of our families and communities.... We cannot renew our country when, within a decade, more than half of the children will be born into families where there has been no marriage."

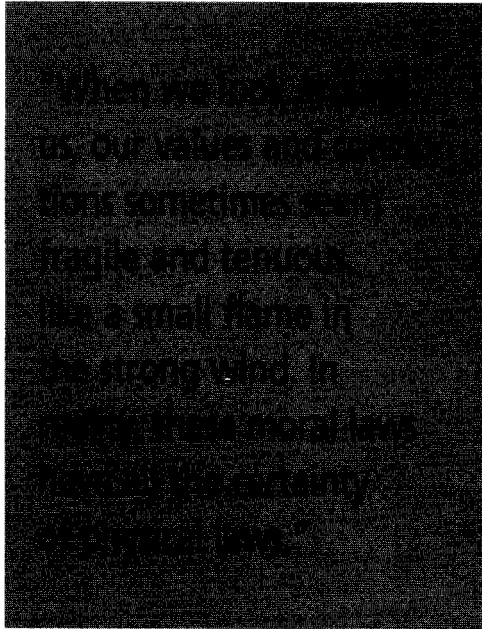
And the President has also publicly testified, "We are a people of faith....It is religion that helps to give our people the character without which a democracy cannot survive." Now there are many questions about his sincerity, but there is no question that these arguments, coming from Bill Clinton, are clear evidence of a national reawakening to the importance of family, freedom, and faith as well as a renewed understanding of the



urgency and necessity of virtue.

Indeed, there seems to be a growing agreement among all citizens on the nature of our problems as a society. A diverse group has found company at the end of the same tether. It is increasingly obvious that first, we cannot build an orderly society when there is disorder in our souls; second, a political culture cannot survive apart from a moral culture that nourishes the values that made it possible; and third, these values are shaped in stable, two-parent families where children are initiated into the civilized traditions of the human race.

We have rediscovered in the nineties that democracy is moral before it is political and that social order is the public evidence of private conscience. This has led, ultimately, to spiritual questions. As Christian author G.K. Chesterton foretold at the beginning of this century, "Men will more and more realize that there is no meaning in democracy if there is no meaning in anything; and that there is no meaning in anything if the Universe has not a center of significance and an authority that is the author of our rights."



## Stop Cursing the Darkness: The Future Is Bright

**W**hat is the reaction of conservatives to this gradual but undeniable shift in attitudes? Sometimes, it seems as though we are angry to hear our own words from other mouths. Sometimes, it seems as though we remain content to rehearse our disadvantages and resentments. Yes, the media is still largely secular and often biased. Yes, Hollywood still too frequently celebrates moral anarchy. Yes, politics still tries its best to avoid hard issues. But this is like cursing the darkness during a splendid sunrise. We should be calling people to confront the implications of this new consensus, not questioning the motives and sincerity of those involved. Our goal should be to extend and strengthen our agreement instead of merely replaying the bat-

les of the past.

Such is the proper attitude of a confident belief. And there is reason for confidence. Sixties' liberalism is dead at its core—killed by truths it denied but could not escape. It suffers from ideological leprosy; the face still smiles while the limbs drop from the body. Liberalism is no longer the self-assured faith of radicals. It is the discredited dogma of a destructive era. It still ruins lives, like a lingering infection, but it has lost its power to inspire the imagination.

Today, we can confidently assert the bankruptcy of moral relativism, not because we are self-righteous puritans but because we know *from objective evidence* that it is the vulnerable who suffer most when standards are weakened—children making decisions about work, sex, and violence when the stakes can be despair, prison, or death. We can confidently assert the failure of social planning, not because we don't care for the disadvantaged but because we know *from objective evidence* that planning has been an economic and political disaster, not to mention a sustained assault on the human dignity of the poor and weak.

When we look around us, our values and convictions sometimes seem fragile and tenuous, like a small flame in the strong wind. In reality, these moral laws have all the certainty of physical laws. When they are violated, a society always discovers the revenge of offended absolutes. This is not a source of pride, it is a source of sorrow. But it is also a source of opportunity—the opportunity to show that traditional values are survival values and to build a coalition of realists about human nature and human needs across the ideological spectrum.

"At least five times," wrote Chesterton in the early 20th century, "the faith has, to all appearances, gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases, it was the dog that died." Every promise of the sixties has been broken—and now that dog is dead—but the future is bright and full of life. We can come forth once again with the positive ideas of a confident belief, and, whatever our past differences, we should welcome the company of those who share it. ♣