

Some curmudgeons attribute these developments to passing demographic changes instead of more lasting improvements in attitudes or behavior. It is true, for example, that part of the decline of crime rates is a result of there being fewer Americans in high-crime age groups. But even if we adjust for things like age factors, we still find strongly encouraging trends in most areas.

It is my verdict that, yes, we are entering a new era of civil virtue and cultural enlightenment in America. It is always hazardous to make predictions based on short term trends, so my judgment may prove premature. But I don't believe the nearly universal patterns in the charts preceding this essay will simply blow away.

I draw several conclusions from all this. First, conservatives have tended to be too grumpy and even apocalyptic about the trends in American behavior. The institutions of civil society did show signs of breaking down in the 1960s and '70s, but Americans are a sane, flexible, responsive people, and we are now seeing a resurgence in family, neighborhood, charity, and church strength as they have changed their minds about things and shifted gears. Even schools are starting to perform better—though vast improvement is still imperative—as students and parents are provided more choices.

Perhaps the more important conclusion one should draw from these statistics is that conservatives may just be winning the cultural war. There are many signs that the traditional virtues that once were the bedrock of America and that cultural conservatives and others have worried are in decline—hard work, discipline, stable family life, honesty, and self-reliance—are back in vogue. Today, it is the Left's values and social institutions that are in retreat.

Americans have mostly rejected the false compassion of the giveaway welfare state. They have certainly rejected the biggest lie of all: that government can take the place of a parent. The welfare reform bill of 1996 was arguably the most consequential piece of social legislation in a quarter-century. For the first time, the Left was forced to concede that the Great Society failed. Americans have likewise almost universally rejected the drug culture. Crime is falling specifically because Americans decided to put the screws to repeat criminals.

But if conservatives are to win the hearts and minds of America's youth, they have to find a way to promote virtue without sounding prudish and preachy. Conservatives sometimes rush to moral judgment too quickly, falling into the same trap as liberals: identifying a problem and then concluding "there ought to be a law." I would argue that's the problem with the V-chip, and the crusade to keep smut off the Internet. Here Gary Bauer is as wrong as Hillary Clinton: It doesn't take a village to keep a child from watching smut on TV. That's what parents are for.

For the most part Americans want the government's meddlesome arm out of their daily lives. That's reasonable, since in recent decades government has repeatedly been a

source of social decline. The welfare system was the driving force behind the surge in fatherless homes and all that that produced. Government contributed to the surge in crime, especially through its drug policies in inner cities. The decline in SAT scores is a direct result of the stranglehold that the government has over education.

Conservatives shouldn't underestimate the extent to which moral suasion has been an effective deterrent to destructive social behavior. In the 1980s the Left ridiculed Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" anti-drugs campaign, but there are strong signs it worked. So did the Negro College Fund ads proclaiming "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." The anti-abortion ads championing "Life..." seem also to have helped. One big reason for the decline in abortion is, as the Centers for Disease Control put it, "attitudinal changes." More Americans believe abortion is wrong, even if they may not be fully convinced it should be illegal. Likewise, Richard Nadler, editor of the mid-western conservative *K.C. Jones Monthly*, reports that "the resurgence of teen virginity correlates with increases in the sex education strategies favored by social conservatives," including promoting abstinence in schools.

It's human nature to believe things used to be better in days past. Some things were. But many things are also better now than 40 years ago: families have much higher incomes, better housing, more amenities; far more children will go to college; our health and medicines are much better; racial intolerance has declined; women have more choices. Yes, there have been more tranquil times in the past, but in many ways, these are the good old days.

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Deviancy Is Down, Not Out

Mitchell B. Pearlstein

Asks whether America has turned a corner, I think immediately of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's idea of "defining deviancy down." As he noted, many behaviors once considered intolerable have become commonplace, without any acknowledgement that standards have been dropped. So let me interpret the data we've just been presented through the senator's prism of lowered cultural expectations.

Take divorce rates. They have held steady since the mid-1970s, even dropping slightly, after a steep upsurge in the decade prior caused largely by the spread of no-fault divorce laws, aided and abetted by the self-indulgence then swamping the nation.

Needless to say, it's good that fewer men and women are divorcing, and even better that fewer children are caught up annually in the agony. But if one looks at a graph of divorce rates all the way from 1920 to 1990, the years 1975-90 form a high plateau overlooking what is mostly a valley to the left. I say "mostly,"

because in the middle of the valley, centered on about 1945, is an exceedingly sharp peak.

This divorce spike a half-century ago was the result of marriages failing during and after World War II, for many unsurprising reasons. Product of a world-shattering event, that was a highly unusual situation. Yet even the World War II divorce surge never approached the height of the 1975-90 plateau.

In other words, what has come to be the norm is measurably more frightening (or at least it should be) than the extraordinary, time-limited degradation of a world war. The fact that part of me is inspired to turn cartwheels because the divorce rate is reversing a bit is an exquisite example, I'm afraid, of defining deviancy down.

Take another example: Doomsayers have been pointing out for some time that the out-of-wedlock birth rate for the country as a whole today is higher than it was for African Americans in the early 1960s, when Moynihan grimly declared that the black family was in "crisis." Many, then, think it's wrong to celebrate a decline that merely takes teen sex rates from the outrageous to the, well, still outrageous.

Improvements, though modest, are clearly revealed in the nearby tables. But my own enthusiasm is constrained by my knowledge of Minnesota over the last three decades. You remember Minnesota, don't you? The state anointed by *Time* in a 1974 cover story as the one that "worked." On the one hand, conditions in my home state are still consistently, often substantially, better than in the rest of nation. On the other hand, it's hard not to be sobered by the way Minnesota has been regressing toward the national mean. Violent crime presents a stark example. It's still much safer to be in Minnesota than in most places across the country. But between 1960 and 1991, Minnesota's violent-crime rate increased by 675 percent, compared to a comparatively hygienic 355 percent nationally.

What of more recent years? A new study by my Minneapolis think tank shows that while violent crime dropped nationwide by about 16 percent from 1991-96, it rose in Minnesota by about 7 percent. So while the Twin Cities remain a good place to live, we are not enjoying the same kind of renaissance that New Yorkers, for instance, are reveling in.

I don't want to be nuanced to the point of evasion. If I'm forced to vote up or down on whether the United States has turned a corner, put me down, what the heck, as a yes. And if I'm obliged to pick one reason why this is so—beyond believing that any number of pendulums had neither room nor choice but to start swinging back sometime—it's reflected in the table showing a rise over the last two decades of people saying that religion is "very important" in their lives.

My point is not just not that people are more likely to act responsibly when they are more faithful. It's that the rise of religiosity reveals a greater willingness to give serious consideration, publicly and privately, to sensitive subjects. Reporting

on the last election, the *Washington Post* noted that "Not since the civil rights era...have Democratic challengers so aggressively and openly used religious language in their campaigns." The reporter argues that the tactic is partly a reaction to the "Christian Coalition's success," but also shows a "growing realization that an enormous political prize awaits candidates who successfully tap this underrepresented pool of voters."

I don't think it's too far a leap to suggest that Americans are increasingly disposed to express appropriately "judgmental" thoughts, not just about easy things such as smoking in restaurants and recycling pop cans, but about much messier and more intimate topics, such as the manner in which babies are brought into this world.

At the organization I lead, the public events that consistently draw the biggest, most animated crowds are typically those that engage politically incorrect moral issues. I'm thinking, for example, of Glenn Loury explaining the power of faith in reducing ghetto poverty. Michael Medved talking in vividly religious terms about protecting children from what he describes as a national assault on innocence. Or the Reverend Floyd Flake describing the responsibility of churches to save poor children from inner-city public schools.

I'm also thinking of the people who have said, especially right after we opened shop in 1990, that they didn't necessarily agree with our conservative take on issues, but they hoped we would "keep talking about values."

That's encouraging, because it is my view that the hardest—which is to say, most human—problems facing our country will never get solved until enough people grab their heads and say, "My God, we're committing suicide and we simply can't do this any longer."

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But What About Clinton?

Robert Bork

Suggestions that we have reversed the disastrous social and cultural trends of the past 30 years and are returning to a happier state are interesting, cheery, and unpersuasive. Perhaps that will happen, perhaps we will return to the healthier climate of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, a possibility the charts on display here are apparently intended to support, but it is at least equally likely, if still worse does not lie ahead, that we will have to learn to live in the degraded moral climate that surrounds us now. The implications of the chart showing a rising percentage of Americans who identify "a letdown in moral values" as one of the "major causes of our problems today" (from 50 percent to 62 percent in 28 years) are thoroughly ambiguous. Either Americans are more moral today than they were in