

1970, which is possible, if you remember 1970, or the problems have become so much worse that public alarm is rising. In any event, the public that is alarmed is the same public that supports the worst of our popular entertainment and refuses to be "judgmental" about the behavior of others. The public's view of the damage done by dissipating morals rose simultaneously with the pathologies tracked in the other charts, which is not a cause for optimism. Alarm is not, it appears, synonymous with a determination to reform.

But what of the other charts? They show calamitous rises in pathologies followed, quite recently, by slight declines. That hardly signifies the end of the bull market in social corruption. The decades-long explosion of illegitimate births has shown a slight decline for whites and a more substantial one for blacks whose rates were much greater to begin with. Rates for both groups remain spectacularly high by historic measures. Births to teenagers seem to have declined only modestly for all groups other than blacks.

The same modest decline is shown by the overall rate of abortions. The great jump in abortion rates followed *Roe v. Wade*, which carried a moral message as well as an (unsupported) legal conclusion. Abortion rates are still far above the pre-*Roe* rate. Studies indicate that about nine-tenths of all abortions are done for reasons of personal convenience, not for reasons of health or danger to the mother's life. That in itself is a dismaying cultural indicator. While the percentage of Americans who think that abortion should be legal under *any* circumstances has dropped, it is amazing that 22 percent think so, considering that this approval extends to partial-birth abortions, a gruesome procedure, indistinguishable from infanticide, that has no medical justification.

So it goes through most of the rest of the charts: high numbers and percentages followed by very slight to quite moderate declines for such activities as recreational sex, teenage sex, divorce, number of children involved in divorce, crimes, use of illicit drugs, and adolescent suicides. Some of this is clearly misleading. Crime, for example, is expected to increase dramatically as a larger and more violent generation of young males arrives. The strong rise in per capita charitable donations is likely due more to prosperity and an exuberant economy than to any moral transformation.

The one clearly encouraging chart shows a significant decline in the welfare rolls. Perhaps, just perhaps, that decline has something to do with the recent decline in pathologies that are related to a welfare-dependent underclass. If so, those are unambiguous glad tidings.

The statistics on religiousness are surely deceptive.

A great many Americans attend church, but many—probably most—of the people in the pews do not accept all of the teachings of their religion but pick and choose the more agreeable items. Few religions stress morality rather than personal comfort and therapy. There is much talk from the pulpit about God's love but little about sin. The dominant culture has invaded mainline religions so that "religiousness" does not necessarily mean improved moral behavior. There is disagreement whether traditional biblical religion is reviving, and the depth and staying power of any revival remain to be seen.

One highly significant chart is missing from this collection, however: a graph showing Bill Clinton's share of the popular vote in the 1992 and '96 elections and his approval ratings today. The American people have long known, not to put too fine a point on the matter, that Clinton is a congenital liar, a serial adulterer, and a draft dodger. Only a few decades previously any one of those characteristics would have been absolutely disqualifying. They were not in 1992 or afterward. Today his approval ratings are stratospheric despite our knowledge that in the past year he has committed perjury in legal proceedings, lied to Congress, lied to the American people, tampered with witnesses, and obstructed justice. His party stands implacably behind him, frustrating congressional inquiries and slandering the independent counsel. None of this seems to matter. The man is a felon several times over, but, such are our times, he is unlikely either to be removed from office or indicted once he leaves it. Public morality, like private morality, has been privatized.

Perhaps the President's case is an aberration, or perhaps we have always been vulnerable to demagogues but never before had one so skillful. Nevertheless, America's response to the White House scandals shows we must be wary of taking relatively slight and altogether ambiguous improvements in other matters as presaging a better, more moral tomorrow. The President's rise, after all, paralleled the rise of the other pathologies reflected in the charts. If Clinton's case is dispositive, then, the answer to the question "Has America turned a cultural corner?" is "Yes, but the wrong one."

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The Return of Common Sense

Michael Barone

Yes, America is turning some corners and heading in the right direction. And for the simplest reason: People learn from experience. Political liberals have

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assumed history is a story of progressively larger government. Cultural liberals have assumed history is a story of progress from restraint to liberation ("You can't keep them down on the farm after they've seen Pa-ree"). But history proves both assumptions are false: Governments got smaller after Waterloo; Victorians had more self-restraint than Georgians. The same iron assumptions of decline are proving wrong today, as the information in this magazine shows.

The bad trends depicted have their roots in 1960s liberalism, which delegitimized restraint even as its own programs were encouraging disastrous disorder. Governmental unwisdom produced unwinnable war in Vietnam and protests at home, just as the Great Society produced riots in the streets. The healthier trends of the present have their roots in the common sense of ordinary people, who have realized a change of direction is both possible and necessary.

Start with the trends affected by government policy-makers. From 1965-75, crime and welfare tripled in America as liberal elites crippled law enforcement, closed jails, and invited anyone who wanted to apply onto the welfare rolls. Now, since about 1993, crime and welfare have been declining on just as steep a curve. This is not a response to a good economy or to demographic trends: Welfare rolls were unre-

sponsive to the economic cycle between 1975 and 1993, and the number of young males in New York City has not decreased 50 percent since 1994, as crime has.

No, the changes occurred because Americans repudiated the bogus expertise of criminologists—who claimed crime could not be controlled by police tactics or reduced by long jail terms—and of social work professors—who claimed welfare could not be reduced by workfare. Acting on common sense instead of supposed elite expertise, public officials like Governor Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin and New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani have reduced welfare in Wisconsin 81 percent and crime in Gotham 50 percent over the past four years.

Similarly, the bogus expert predictions that government spending must always increase faster than the economy have been disproved. Americans have recognized that an ever-larger government is also ever-more inefficient and incompetent. Now, thanks to the end of the Cold War and the election of the Republican Congress in 1994, federal spending is going down as a share of the economy—and voters approve.

Next, move on to today's good trends that result from the personal decisions of ordinary people. The cultural liberals of the 1960s successfully liberated Americans from re-

An American Perestroika

Charles W. Bray, president of the Johnson Foundation and a self-described "liberal Democrat," recently argued in the Chronicle of Higher Education that new conservative challenges to liberal orthodoxies in areas like education, philanthropy, and social policy have had good effects on the nation:

We liberals once had fresh ideas, many of them developed in the 1930s and perfected through the 1960s. But by the 1970s and '80s, too many of these ideas had been bureaucratized, pushed beyond rational limits. Experts came to overwhelm the efforts of the poor and the afflicted to help themselves. "I'm here to help you" really meant, "I know better, and we'll do it my way"—even though this increasingly meant that we would do it in conformity with rules drawn up hundreds or even thousands of miles away.

The vision of a great society withered with experience, but we continued to pursue it—partly because liberals couldn't find an alternative. It did seem odd that the more we spent on law enforcement and welfare, the more crime and hopelessness there seemed to be. The experts told us the solution was "more"—more money for an educational system that wasn't educating, more programs even though similar programs didn't seem to be solving our problems, more experts reinforcing society's bureaucratic strictures.

And then, about 20 years ago, a countermovement began to take shape, which continues to grow. Most of us liberals overlooked it and almost all of us missed its significance at the outset. Its proponents argued for renewed emphasis on family, neighborhood, values, and character, on reducing

the size of government and freeing individual and local initiative. Ideas, not programs, were its currency.

These ideas have proved powerful. And I submit that, although we do not have to accept them all, the entry of new ways of thinking into the American intellectual bloodstream after decades of liberals' monopolizing the public policy debate has been good for the country (if not for the experts who embodied, and profited from, the monopoly).

As both public opinion polls and votes in Congress and state legislatures demonstrate, Americans are thinking—and, increasingly, acting—in new ways, breaking out of the conceptual and practical ruts in which we had become stuck in recent decades. Not all of these new directions will prove fruitful. Not every individual on welfare will find and keep a job. Not every student participating in a character-education program will develop traits we can admire. Not every neighborhood will find its way to vitality and increased participation by citizens. Some charter schools will fail. But this American *perestroika* seems much more likely to succeed in reinvigorating our country than the original version did in the Soviet Union.

I believe we owe this new vigor largely to those pushy intellectual parvenus, the conservatives who, after an absence of decades from the national discourse, are back in force—challenging an encrusted and immobile conventional wisdom, arguing that top-down approaches to local problems are a contradiction in terms, reminding us that even the very poorest have unused talent and energy but no incentive to employ those talents in the previous social-welfare system. Liberal approaches to life's problems and opportunities have been challenged, shaken, turned inside out. The results will be a while in coming.

straints by discouraging religious observance and encouraging divorce, abortion, and adolescent alcohol and drug experimentation. Americans have had a generation to live with the results, and they don't like them—especially the young people who actually grew up under a regimen where parents frequently divorced and shed moral restraints.

The declines in abortion and divorce and teenage alcohol use have been slow but steady, dating from around 1980. The 1990s have seen newer declines in the endorsement and practice of teenage sex, in adolescent suicide, in illegitimate births, as well as new increases in religiosity and teenage church attendance. Some of these changes may have been pushed along by good policies; for instance, welfare reform may have driven down illegitimate births. But more are affected by simple observation of life—Americans, especially young Americans, have seen the liberal future and decided it doesn't work.

Bogus experts still rule most of the national media, the federal bureaucracy, and much (though not all) of the Democratic party. But as on Vietnam and the Great Society, they are losing the hearts and minds of the people.

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The Two Americas

Daniel Lapin

It is normal for a person hearing the thunder of distant guns to want to assume it's nothing but a summer rainstorm. Superficial signs of tranquillity, however, can lull us into complacency. Perhaps these cheerful graphs camouflage America's real war.

Consider this statistical scenario: My wife, Susan, and I struggle joyfully to raise and care for our seven children. Not ten miles from us lives Helen who, like Susan, is also home with her seven offspring. Her pathetically neglected children, each fathered by a different long-forgotten boyfriend, sprawl before a blaring TV. Helen drifts in and out of drug-induced stupor. Although almost a caricature of contrasts, both Susan and Helen represent countless other women. And so a statistician might ecstatically proclaim the good news: 50 percent of women with seven children are now off welfare and at home, caring for their well-nourished children. The statistic may be accurate, but it is not the whole truth about Susan, Helen, and the children.

Many Americans still take as their ideal the biblical blueprint of one man married to one woman, both dedicated to one another and to their children. Yielding

some of their individual autonomy to the responsibilities of family, the men and women in turn enjoy the benefits that family life brings and also unwittingly benefit the community. You and I are better off with God-centered, intact families as neighbors, and their sons are less likely to prey on our property or our daughters.

But many other Americans embrace the seductive vision of the individual, not the family, as the basic unit of society. This vision grants the indulgence of anonymity. It also tragically legitimizes self-destructive ways of life.

When statisticians group these two kinds of Americans together, they camouflage the sad news that we are two separate nations living out two incompatible philosophies. And so we hear that in the past ten years the number of college freshmen who think premarital sex is O.K. has dropped 10 percent. But in reality, at conventional universities the overwhelming majority of freshmen indulge in premarital sex. Just ask them; they will not be ashamed to tell you.

At the same time, on scores of other campuses around America almost none of the unmarried students engage in premarital sex. But lumping the UCLA and Princeton students with those at Brigham Young and Regent University obscures more than it reveals. It's a serious mistake to ignore the specific nature of the schools which encourage self-restraint, or to ignore the character of the families who raised those students with the necessary strength to resist.

Similarly, it sounds wonderful that crime is down since 1990. But the improvement is not evenly distributed. Most crime is still committed by young males raised without real fathers. Children raised in broken homes and provided with no religious education are vastly likelier to behave criminally than children from intact homes.

Illegitimacy? The small reductions that have taken place conceal two vital pieces of the puzzle. One is the incredibly high number of illegitimate births still afflicting our nation. Second is the fact that illegitimacy is overwhelmingly a problem of secularized America.

There are two Americas. The one deriving its model from God suffers very little illegitimacy. There are shameful and false attempts to define the two Americas in terms of race or economic level. In truth, they are separated by moral dichotomies.

Years ago, the stereotype of a vast middle-of-the-road America with a small number of doctrinal secular humanists at one end and an equally small number of "Bible thumpers" at the other, may have been accurate. Today it no longer reflects reality. Americans have migrated from the center, creating ever larger teams at either end of the tug-of-war rope.

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