

For the Family

Millions of Americans Have Been Engaging in Child Sacrifice

Midge Decter

We Americans have many public disagreements, but privately it can be said that we are nowadays firmly bound together by a common unease. Something is going wrong with the constitution of our individual lives. Women, for instance, are noisily embattled, while men smoulder in resentful silence. Drugs and alcoholism, untouched by years of effort to control them, remain at the top of the list of social menaces. Despite the wide availability of effective means of contraception, in some American cities abortions outnumber live births. A new psychotherapy or mood-altering chemical gets produced, as it seems, every minute. And, of course, there are all those divorces, all those lonely and self-seeking men and women hopping from marriage to marriage in search of what they cannot say, all those children abandoned by their fathers, and even, nowadays, abandoned by their mothers. We are forced to ask ourselves a question so vast and general as, what is going on with us? How is it that a people blessed by God, or if you will fate, with better health, longer lives, greater comfort and personal freedom and economic well-being than any previous peoples in history, should give so much evidence of deep trouble?

Neither I nor anyone else can presume to answer this question in full. But I would, in the briefest way, like to suggest an area in which we might begin to find some understanding.

For a generation now, millions upon millions of Americans—I will not say all—have been engaging in child sacrifice. Less bloodily, perhaps, but no less obediently than certain ancient groups of idol worshippers, we have been offering up our children on the altar of a pitiless god. Nor do I mean this as a flowery metaphor. In our case, the idol to whom we have sacrificed our young is not made of wood or gold but of an idea. This idea, very crudely put, is that we are living in an altogether new world with not yet fully understood new moral rules. As inhabitants of this supposedly newly ordered world, we tell ourselves, we have no right to cling to or impose on others outmoded standards of behavior. On the contrary, everyone has a right, even an obligation, to make up his own rules—and with these rules, to make up his

own preferred mode of living. This idea is no mere abstract proposition with us; we have translated it, socially, religiously, politically, and juridically, into the stuff of our everyday existence. And we have, as I said, literally sacrificed our children to it.

Not so very long ago a whole generation of this country's middle-class children rose up in late adolescence and said they could see no reason to prepare themselves to take on the burdens of adult life: to serve their country, for instance, or educate themselves, or make a living. They left school, they ran away, they drugged themselves; in milder cases, they just kind of hung around, growing pale, unkempt, unhealthy, and truculent. And untold numbers of them committed suicide. Again, I do not speak metaphorically. In 10 years the suicide rate of those from 18 to 25 increased by 25 percent. How did we respond to this, we elders—we parents, teachers, clergymen, journalists, civic leaders, and yes, legislators? We applauded them. We said they were the best generation ever seen, they were great idealists, far superior to ourselves. We said they had discovered a new way to live. In short, we abandoned them. Just as surely as if we had with our own hands bared their necks to the ritual knife, we sacrificed them on the altar of our own moral irresponsibility. Those who managed to save themselves did so with no help from any of the authorities in their lives, neither parental, religious, nor intellectual. For none of these authorities would tell them what they needed to know: that life is real and weighty and consequential; that life is good, and only good when it is real and weighty and consequential; that it requires discipline and courage and the assumption of responsibility for oneself and others, and that it repays, and *only* repays discipline and courage and the assumption of responsibility for oneself and others.

Why did mothers and fathers, teachers and ministers, lawgivers and judges, why did all the figures on whom children depend to teach them how to live a decent and rewarding life refuse to tell them what they needed to

MIDGE DECTER is the executive director of the Committee for a Free World.

know? Because they themselves had not the courage of any convictions. How many parents sent—still send—their adolescent children off, unaided and morally and psychically unprotected, into the treacherous ocean of sex simply because they have not the courage to say what they truly believe: that sex in childhood is a dangerous and debilitating and life-denying force? As a society, we do not even any longer have the moral courage to cast out in horror—a horror we all feel—the child pornographer, the pedophile, the committer of incest. We hem and haw and let the courts decide, which they usually do on the basis of fine points of legal procedure.

Does the First Amendment protect the exploiters of 7- and 8-year-old boys for pornographic films? Is that really one of the constitutional rights that have made this country a glory of freedom?

The truth is, we have lost the collective ability to make the simplest moral assertions. And if we have lost it collectively, we are surely in the process of losing it individually as well. For people precisely cannot make up their own lives. They are constituted to be members of communities. They cannot live themselves and cannot bring up their children, not for long, by a standard that finds no confirmation in the surrounding community. An individual's inner resolve, when it must be engaged every day in a battle against the surrounding moral atmosphere, begins to erode and crack. A community that does not love virtue—yes, I will dare to use so archaic a word—takes an unimaginable toll on the virtuous. Instead of rewarding, it punishes them. Out of historic error, out of sloth, out of cowardice, out of lack of collective will, we are permitting ourselves to become a society that punishes the virtuous. That punishment is every day being incorporated into the laws of the land, written and unwritten.

It is the family—the greatest tribute to and the most brilliant invention of the human moral capacity—that has lately taken the greatest punishment of all. For one thing, we pretend no longer to be sure what *is* a family. We debate publicly, as we did even at a White House conference not many years back: Is a family the same thing as a household? Is it two lesbians? Is it a man and a woman sharing the same roof out of wedlock? Why not? Are we not, after all, free as people living in a new order to make up our own definitions? In attempting to erase its uniqueness as an institution, we remove from the family the community affirmation that is the absolutely essential ingredient to its strength as an institution. It was claimed, and our policy makers concurred, that society engaged in unfair discrimination against those who chose (I believe the fashionable word is “opted”) not to live in traditional families. But such discrimination, in everything from tax policy to public speech, is precisely the means by which a society makes known its standards and values. Why should a society that professes to believe in the family *not* discriminate in its favor? Even to have to speak of “belief” in the family, as if it were an alternative among many, is a sign of our pathology. Indeed, by turning the family into a merely voluntary, optional relationship, we have ironically increased its capacity to make its members unhappy. Thus our divorce rate.



The family, as I have said, is a brilliant moral invention. It teaches us that life is not lived alone. To be a parent is to discover, sometimes with considerable surprise, that there are lives more valuable to one than one's own. To be a child of parents is to experience two indispensably humanizing things. The first of these is that no matter who or what one turns out to be, there are two people, *one of each sex*, to whom one's existence is and will ever remain of overriding importance. The second is to incorporate into one's being the knowledge that human life, as opposed to animal existence, is a system of mutual obligations and dependencies.

To get beyond self is the only possibility for happiness, just as to understand obligation is the only possibility for genuine individual freedom. That may, as little children are wont to say, be “no fair,” but it is the truth. Thus the family—as everyone knows, no matter how many revolutions of consciousness and being he claims have taken place—is a mother and a father and their children. And thus, too, the family is one of society's first priorities.

I do not pretend to have any simple answer as to how we can get ourselves out of our present moral morass. But I do know that it will be necessary for us to begin to talk to one another from the heart instead of out of a lot of junky and morally impertinent fashionable ideas. And I do know that it will be necessary for us as a society, without fear for the trendy opinion of mankind, forcefully and vocally to discriminate in favor of what we all, deep down, still long to believe is good and valuable and right.

Middle East Fantasies

Penalizing Our Allies Is No Way to Make Peace

Oscar Handlin

The recent tragedies in Lebanon came after a year of well-meaning but naive American efforts to bring peace to the Middle East. President Reagan's September 1982 proposal for Palestinian self-government on the West Bank was rejected immediately by Israel and afterward by the Palestine Liberation Organization and by Jordan. His efforts in 1983 to remove all foreign troops from Lebanon were similarly in vain. When U.S. pressure upon Israel and Lebanon finally elicited a withdrawal agreement after extended and elaborate negotiations, the Syrians refused the enticement of peace. All those months of debate were wasted. By then, the American peace-keeping force in Beirut had begun to suffer casualties, and the United States was urging Israel to slow its withdrawal.

These failures were predictable, because the U.S. peace initiatives were based on wishful fantasies. The central premise of Mr. Reagan's proposals was that moderate Arabs, and perhaps even Syria's President Hafez al-Assad, would be willing to engage in negotiations if only Israel would demonstrate some flexibility. It was assumed that the Lebanese, Palestinians, Jordanians, and Saudis could not be flexible at the outset: Though moderate in the privacy of their hearts, they had to refrain from conciliatory gestures out of fear of the extremists. So all pressure for concessions was placed on Israel. After yielding Sinai and its oil to Egypt, Israel was to abandon also its claim to East Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria.

In short, the United States expected of its friends a level of accommodation it did not expect of its enemies. Instead of penalizing its opponents and rewarding its supporters, it tried to win over the former at the expense of the latter. This strategy did not work with Sikorski of Poland, whose government in exile never got the free elections promised it at Yalta. It did not work with Thieu, who never got the North Vietnamese withdrawal promised in the Paris peace talks. It could hardly be expected to work with Menachem Begin.

In the zeal for pushing the peace process along those channels, there was a disposition not to remember how the fighting between Israel and Syria in Lebanon had started. All those months Ambassador Philip Habib had shuttled about the capitals in an effort to hasten with-

drawal had once had quite another purpose. His original mission had been to persuade the Syrians to remove the surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) they had installed in Lebanon in contravention of an earlier agreement. In 1983 that issue no longer seemed worth discussion; the Syrians had by then put into place newer, superior SAMs, manned by Soviet personnel, without protest or overt concern that they impeded the peace process. Withdrawal had become the issue, and Secretary of State George Shultz continued to exude reassurance until Ambassador Habib's patience finally earned its reward and Damascus declared him persona non grata, refusing even to talk further with him. A new emissary then assumed his place.

Misread History

During those setbacks, American diplomats were presumably inspired by the Camp David agreements. Egypt had been Israel's most implacable enemy, but after years of U.S. shuttle diplomacy, as well as territorial concessions wrung from Israel in the Sinai, President Anwar el-Sadat finally agreed to make peace. Could not the same hope be held out for Syria's Assad? But it was a misreading of history to suppose that Sadat's willingness to negotiate resulted from the genius of U.S. diplomacy. Instead, it was a fortuitous by-product of what could have been a diplomatic disaster.

General Sadat came up through the ranks of a conventional military career. Imprisoned by the British as a Nazi spy in 1942, he became a friend and follower of Gamal Abdul Nasser, whom he succeeded in 1970 as head of state. Sadat long followed the same bellicose line as his predecessor, and on Yom Kippur in 1973, in concert with Syria, he launched a treacherous and almost successful attack upon Israel.

OSCAR HANDLIN is director of the Harvard University Library and the Carl Pforzheimer professor of history at the university. His books include *Chance or Destiny*, *Fire-Bell in the Night*, *The Americans*, *Truth in History*, and *The Uprooted*. His most recent book is *The Distortion of America*.