

"THE VALUE OF 'VALUES'"

based upon a  
commencement address

by

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June 1, 1992

THE VALUE OF "VALUES"

"Values" are emerging as a major theme in the coming elections, and it's a pity that the debate -- if there is any -- will probably amount to little more than slugging it out with slogans. Family values, educational values, democratic values -- you name it, we've got it. But after the dust settles, it appears that nothing will be left but dust.

The reason is simple. "Values" (a concept that is as old as Plato but was probably first elaborated in the modern era by Immanuel Kant) are not self-sufficient entities that can be implemented by themselves, nor can they be directly transmitted even in a teaching situation. Values are like essences or souls: they function only in a larger context. If disembodied, they are like friendly ghosts -- they make nice noises but are really unreal. Values must be dressed in practical actions, just as souls must be clothed in bodies. Values and souls share a touching modesty: they will not appear, in public or in private, undraped.

Hence, the question of values in our troubled society cannot be approached by preaching, certainly not by politicians. Rather, we must shop around, with a high degree of sensitivity

and sophistication, for a *practical* way of insinuating them into our body politic rather than having political bodies shout them at each other.

That they require a structured context that was taught over 2,000 years ago when the Jewish sage Hillel was asked by a pagan to convert him to Judaism. He imposed one condition -- Hillel must teach him the entire Torah "while standing on one foot." He was asking for a quick fix: "fast -- give me the chief value and I'll know what it's all about." Hillel's answer was: "'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'; all the rest is commentary -- now go and learn." There certainly is a fundamental value -- love of fellow human -- but merely stating it is almost meaningless. There are no effective "values" without a nurturing context. Hence, the whole of the Biblical tradition and its way of life is the commentary, the context. "Go and learn" for many years and only then will you be able to realize the underlying value of love.

Take family values. No amount of preaching can instill them in a home where poverty crushes the human will and there is no received heritage of family relationships strong enough to overcome the hopelessness of everyday life. Building a context for such values requires providing work, incentives to succeed, disincentives to siring a child and then abandoning it and its mother, and an educational system that will give pupils hope

along with skills. But that is expensive. Political pieties about "values" come much cheaper.

Democratic values represent the opposite problem. They do have a tried and tested structure in our country, despite all the criticism about its reputed failings. Here the problem is not creating a context, but preventing its erosion. Multiculturalism and the various ethnocentrisms are not without worth. But if they are allowed to replace instead of enriching the common American heritage of democracy -- a creature of Western culture and its "dead, white European males" along with their literary "canon" -- democratic values will have no context in which to flourish and then will surely die.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., is right when in his *The Disuniting of America*, he pleads for reaffirmation of what Gunnar Myrdal has called "the American Creed" -- the dignity and equality of all human beings, the inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and opportunity -- against the current attempts to dethrone it. Schlesinger is not beyond criticism. His encouragement of assimilation and intermarriage, for one, betrays an insensitivity to those ethnic and religious groups which prefer to retain their group integrity within the context of a free, democratic, and just society. But his fundamental thesis should be heeded if "democratic values" are to survive as more than campaign rhetoric.



So by all means let the debate continue, but on a more realistic basis. "Values" cannot be pre-packaged in lesson-plans or enforced from political platforms or even legislated by government. Values emerge organically from realities; they do not create them. Everything depends on the proper structure. What we need, therefore, is the political will to invest in making values happen. For this, government and industry and academia and religious and civic groups must join in the effort to recapture for our society those values worth living and dying for by identifying the practical programs that embody them.

Anything less will make a mockery of the very values we preach, and lead people to believe that, in the final analysis, "values" are valueless.

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