

The State of Our Culture

By Midge Decter

My friends, you see before you this morning someone in a certain state of perplexity. I am what some people at least would call a good citizen: I do not speed, or park illegally, and I do not litter. While it is true that I have been known to display a certain indifference to the plight of spotted owls—not to mention foxes, raccoons, and especially minks—I am at least not mean to dogs and cats. I do not cheat on my taxes, and since I live in New York City, not to mention New York State, you should understand that that means a whole lot of not cheating. And I did not vote for Hillary Clinton. Yet here I am, talking to a group of people who are collectively my favorite people in this world, and the only subject they could think of for me to talk to you about is that very noisome and irksome problem that goes by the name of culture. Perhaps some day they will let me talk about something more pleasant, like economic recession or what to do about North Korea.

Of course, when I tell you that my topic is American “culture,” I do not mean what ought to be meant by the term, that is, the way most people living in the United States think and feel and behave toward one another. That might be a whole lot of fun to think and talk about, for American culture in that sense is positively fascinating and various and full of wonderful bits of gold. But no. My assignment today is to talk about culture in the other, very far from amusing, sense: namely, the way a particular gang of very powerful and influential people have for a long time now been insisting that Americans should think and feel and behave toward one another. They are not so numerous, these powerful people, but they have succeeded in making so much noise that the rest of us can barely hear ourselves trying to think our own sensible thoughts. To the point, indeed, where describing this din has become rather like sending out dispatches from the midst of an artillery battle.

And that theater of operations called culture, through no intention on the part of most of us, is the place to which we have now been dragged, fighting—it is no exaggeration to say—for our very lives. That we had no wish to be here, however, does not, I am afraid, make us entirely blameless for our present predicament. For too long too many of us hoped, or pretended, that all those influential people—the press, the media, the universities, the bureaucrats, the intellectuals—were not really all that powerful, that they would somehow go away, or that we could get rid of them by outvoting them (as in fact we regularly enough do). In this, we were not unlike the United States itself at the end of World War II, when we brought the boys home and danced in the streets, and then had to mobilize all over again. But when it comes to culture in the sense I have been assigned to talk about today, hoping, and even voting, count for little; what matters—again as at the end of World War II—are the facts on the ground—or in the present case, the ideas in the air.

When did all this noise—and the bloody battles it presaged—start? It would be hard to answer this question in fewer than ten large tomes, but let me sketch just a few of the early warnings.

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In the 1960s, the cadre of cultural spokesmen I described before began to announce that "our young people"—for which read their young people—were the most brilliant, the most gifted, and the most idealistic, youths the world had ever seen. That they were busy trashing their universities, especially the libraries thereof; that they were singing hymns to drugs; that many of them were running off to communes or even simply nice vacation spots, such as San Francisco, Taos, or Aspen—where, incidentally, they were living on checks from home or, in the cases where such checks did not materialize, on welfare; that they were falsely claiming to be homosexual or crazy in order to avoid the draft; that they were timing their so-called peace demonstrations to coincide with their exam weeks, thereby making clear the true depth of their idealism; and finally and most horribly, that they were committing suicide in unprecedented numbers; all this made no difference to the major spokesmen of our culture. All the while these so-called "kids" were doing these things under our very noses, they were still being proclaimed the best and the brightest. Their standards, it was said, were simply too high to permit of their taking up their parents' dreary, suffocating lives of getting and spending. And as I said, many too many of us sat by and watched as our children and their friends were being trained in their schools and universities, in song and story, to serve as cannon fodder for all the devilish liberal pretensions of the age. You think that what we are teaching you is a bunch of irrelevant—to use their word for it—crap? said their educators. How wonderful of you to say so; we surrender. And the media, and the press, and many, tragically many, of their own parents followed suit—or pretended to.

At about the same time there came along a company of radical blacks, community organizers and politicians, who in the name of justice set about depriving their constituents of both the ambition and the courage necessary to achieving the lives that would have brought them into full partnership in American society. Blacks are oppressed, said their putative spokesmen, therefore dish them out some bogus equality in the form of unearned perks and jobs—to be administered, of course, by us. Do not educate the children, they said, merely pity them, make excuses for them, and above all, do not expect anything of them. Give them what we will all agree to call self-esteem by handing us political power and jobs. And need I say that these so-called "leaders" are still at it—perhaps more so than ever. After all, as the late Bayard Rustin once so memorably remarked, "Oppression pays." It is an understatement to say that the cultural arbiters of this society raised not a finger to oppose this crime against black children. Nor have they found the heart to do so until this very day, even as we witness the fruit of their ideas in such happy symptoms as drive-by shootings and an ever-growing cohort of fatherless (and often nowadays also motherless) babies.

Then there were the women. Ah, the women. Using the pretext of the demand for equality, a group of the luckiest, healthiest, most prosperous, best educated, and most kindly treated young women in the history of the world declared open warfare on men, on motherhood, on nature itself (including, though some people are surprised to hear it, sex). Once again everyone sat by—especially men: fathers, husbands, boy friends, bosses—watching passively with barely a murmur of protest while a completely gratuitous and deep-seated misery set in. Now we have reached the point where the back sections of even the most respectable magazines are given over to pages and pages of personal ads placed by women seeking men and men seeking women. Once upon a time this kind of advertising was exclusively given over to invitations to various forms of illicit and kinky sex—and was carried in the kind of publications that arrived in the mail in brown paper wrappers: "Couple in Toronto," one of these ads might say, "seeking like-minded friends for parlor games; p.s., we play both ways, watchers invited." Or something to that effect, usually somewhat more graphic than my example. But who cared? Such people lived in a different world from ours and were happy to stay out of our way, and out of mind. The ads I am speaking of now are quite new and speak to a major, and growing, social disturbance. The advertisers are perfectly respectable people, and their claims and invitations evoke a spreading

inability of men and women, young and not young, to get together, or having once got together, to negotiate the kind of settlement that would enable them to stay that way. The ads are written, to save space, in a kind of shorthand: "YSWF [which stands for young single white female] attractive and fun-loving, loves to dance, seeks man 30 to 40 for fun and romance, with a possible view to commitment." Or it might be "DWPF" [divorced white Protestant female] or SJF [single Jewish female] "mature, full-figured, opera-lover seeks the company of S or D mature, sympathetic male who likes to travel. Non-smoker required." I could go on and on with such examples, but you get the point. I urge you, in any case, if you have not already done so, to read a page or two of these ads, for your education. In a way, even more interesting are the ads from the men, many of whom announce themselves to be lawyers, stockbrokers, accountants, doctors. Here is a characteristic specimen taken from a recent issue of *New York Magazine*: "Head for Surgery, Heart for Love—an outgoing, fun, 'old-fashioned good guy,' handsome, prominent MD, sophisticated, 39, fit, tall, mega-successful—seeks warm, passionate, charming lady under 37, who finds meaning in building a relationship and family. Note/photo necessary." Seeking, seeking, seeking: fun, companionship, commitment, romance, sympathy—all the things that flirting and courtship were once the means for working out. But plain old flirting and courtship, in this age of bad temper and sexual harassment lawsuits, is no longer an available option. Where did they come from, all these educated, accomplished, respectable—and desperately lonely—people? Read and weep: they are the casualties of a pointless and destructive, but too long unresisted, war between the sexes. They may not seem as urgent a social problem as, say, the ever-growing cadre of unmarried teenage mothers. After all, they are not homeless, nor unemployed, nor on the public dole; eventually, desperate enough, they may even find one another. But they are in their way no less serious a symptom of a social dislocation. The famous young people of yore are, to be sure, now advancing inexorably toward early middle age, and are, for the most part, now also engaged in getting and spending—with, you might almost say, a vengeance. But it is not for nothing that one of the country's better-selling publications is a magazine called, simply, "Self," nor that odd and exotic psychotherapies abound, nor that the country is positively awash in that new psychic solvent called Prozac.

There are other loud detonations on this battlefield I could tell you about, such as the way the world's newest venereal disease, AIDS, has been culturally transmuted into a positively honorific achievement. I don't know if any of you watched the Academy Awards last month, but for those of you who didn't it might be of some interest to hear how Tom Hanks, winner of an Oscar for his performance of a man dying of AIDS in the movie *Philadelphia*, gave his acceptance speech with tears in his eyes and sent greetings to all the "angels in heaven," men who had reached that happy place by virtue of having, unlike Hanks, actually died of AIDS. But to speak of this bewildering development in full detail would require me among other things to describe for you the so-called AIDS-education materials now making their way through America's public schools courtesy of such expert advisors as the Gay Men's Health Crisis—materials whose text and particularly whose graphic illustrations I was loath to show even to my husband. And if not to him, I am certainly not going to make them graphic for you. I need hardly say that the Gay Men's Health Crisis is a government-funded consultant to the educational establishment. AIDS, then, has not only become the occasion for much high sentiment—particularly in Hollywood (the source of so much elevated sentiment in our culture)—but perhaps even more astonishingly, this curse from which there is no reprieve has somehow been turned into an opportunity to instruct the nation's elementary-school children in how to become adept at the very practices—including, I am afraid, anal intercourse—that, aside from the sheer horror of this assault on their childhood—I am talking fifth grade!—would most put them in danger of contracting the disease. I kid you not about what is going on in a number of school systems—the seduction of babies!—nor, take my word for it, am I in the least exaggerating. On the contrary, history will

look back in utter mystification at how the carriers of a murderous plague came to be called angels in heaven and were invited to teach the children about health and safety.

In short, as Bill Bennett's *Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* has made so plain, we are in the soup. And I haven't even mentioned the universities—the greatest consumer fraud worked upon a complaisant public since the great South Sea Bubble of the 18th century. Were I to get started on this subject, we would be here until our closing banquet. It is enough to say that everything I have described above has come together in one grand synthesis on the nation's campuses, lustily presided over by those now-tenured former youths of the 1960s.

But blessedly—for me, for you, and for this mixed-up country of ours—the story does not end there. It is true that we all of us have had a hand, if only by default, in this three-decades'-long descent into moral and spiritual tumult; still, we do happily have other claims to make for ourselves. Despite all the moaning and groaning that continues apace in the press and media, for example, the country remains a veritable miracle of productivity—and we have had a hand in this, too. Now, productivity does not come from nowhere; it is an outcome of that other, everyday culture, the one that would have been so much fun to talk about. Moreover, despite all the stress and strain that have been put on our political institutions, they have nevertheless been left standing, a little shaky perhaps, but still in place—and again, we have had a major hand in their survival.

Mere survival, of course, is not enough. For if it has taken many centuries to create the institutions of a democratic republic like ours, it need surely not take as long to destroy them. After all, to build is a slow process, but to tear down is all too quick and easy. A few sticks of dynamite will do the trick. The engine of our way of life, then, does not come with a lifetime warranty. We are called upon to keep it in repair, not every year or with each quadrennial election, but every single day. If so much of America's public culture has under our not sufficiently watchful eyes become unworthy of the society we have been blessed with the opportunity to live in, we are nevertheless not helplessly in its grip. We are free people. Which means: our difficulty is also our possibility.

The truth is that culturally speaking, we have not sufficiently been standing up for ourselves. This must seem a strange thing to say at a gathering of The Heritage Foundation, an institution which every day battles, and battles effectively—more effectively, indeed, than any other of its kind the world has ever seen—against the legislative and executive and judicial rot. Let me stop for just a minute to say something personal, something I have never said in public before. When I was invited to serve as a Trustee of Heritage—it is by now a goodly number of years ago—I was of course flattered, honored, and also, I may say, amused. Amused, because I was then one of those odd creatures they called a neoconservative, and it made me smile to see the look of intense watchfulness, even suspicion, on the faces of many of my new conservative colleagues: “What manner of being is this?” said the look they gave me, and “What is she really up to?” Ed Feulner, however, was obviously not among them. Probably he knew that I was not going to remain a “neo” anything for long. In any case, he invited me, and I accepted with the keenest pleasure. That pleasure was nothing to the humble gratitude I have come to feel since, for the sheer thrill of being permitted to take part in so vital and winning and forward-looking an enterprise. In a life of fighting many fights against what has been happening, I have had no other comradeship remotely like it. I thank you all. Especially, of course, Ed.

But there is something more, something desperately important, for me and for all of us to engage ourselves in, because Heritage's battles are, and in the nature of things can only be, the public ones. In the way it conducts these battles the Foundation puts strength and hope into us, but it cannot issue *Memoranda* and *Backgrounders* to our hearts or come full blown into our homes and individual lives: I mean the commonplace lives we lead with our friends and neigh-

bors and especially with our children and grandchildren—the lives beyond politics. Here we all of us have our own work to do—work, moreover, that we must carry on mainly by example, above all, by exemplifying the joy that is to be found in leading productive and ordinary lives. These are the lives on which America depends—its real culture.

As for that other culture, the one I was assigned to talk to you about, growing like some noxious weed all over the surface of things, we have to stand ourselves firmly and unswervingly up against it—and keep on standing and never let up. This is not easy: how often have we been made to seem retrograde and tiresome, even sometimes in our own eyes? How often have we been called bad names, been defamed, or worst of all, ridiculed? How often have we seen our deepest beliefs being traduced as we open our morning papers or turn on our televisions or wander into a movie theater? How often have we been made to feel positively homicidal in conversation with our children's teachers or even listening to sermons in our churches and synagogues? What Heritage has to do requires every ounce of its energy, and what we have to do will require every ounce of ours—and then some. Still, we must never forget how privileged we are. For each time we resist some new cultural fashion, we are engaged in nothing less than saving lives. What greater pleasure than that?

And there is another consolation. We alleged fuddy-duddies are actually guests at the very best party, with the liveliest and most interesting company, in town. While the liberal culture is urging its devotees to move themselves permanently into a kind of massive sick room, we get to stay on the outside, urging them instead to come dance and sing and worship and serve and live and produce and be fruitful and multiply out here with us.

Let us admit it. We are having a wonderful time. And admitting it, let us show it and carry along with us all those blessed new generations, those lovely little babies like the one that I saw here this morning and their lovely babies after them. And let us always remember that to be an American is a gift not an entitlement. We are every day given the chance to turn this gift into a priceless treasure. This time, let's not muff that chance. Thank you.

