

Traditional Family Values

by Bill Herbst

This week's commentary post is another blast from the past reprint, this one from the mid-1990s. The reason for all these reprinted essays is that, having realized last year that the monsters had won, I now have precious little that's new to say about damn near anything, so I'm reaching back into the archives to find a bit of entertainment, technical astrology instruction, or some pop culture history.

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Beginning with the 1980 presidential election (“Morning in America”) and continuing throughout the remaining two decades of the 20th century, political conservatives in America consistently included in their agenda the persistent call for what they termed “a return to traditional family values.” This phrase has been variously interpreted by both proponents on the political/cultural right and opponents on the left to mean many different things. Indeed, part of what makes it such a potent sound-byte is its unspecific inclusiveness. And part of what makes “traditional family values” such a winning slogan is the seeming inviolability of its near-universal appeal and approval — who among us would be so foolish as to oppose the ends for which the phrase lobbies? Surely everyone believes in the sanctity of the family and strong family values, right?

Well friends, I, for one, am *not*. For me, that phrase — “a return to traditional family values” — conjures up shopworn images from the 1950s and early 1960s. The most immediate of the images from television: Father Knows Best, Leave It to Beaver, The Dick Van Dyke and Donna Reed Shows. Pictures of upper-middle class nuclear families, with Mom in her crisp dress and high heels, Dad in his suit and tie off to work in a high-rise office building downtown, one to three well-groomed, squeaky-clean children, all living together in white two-story colonial houses on tree-shaded streets, with clean cars, friendly postmen, and dairy trucks. Half-hour morality tales surrounding the official business of growing up happy in America.

While such images are deeply embedded in my neural circuitry, they never accurately reflected my real life. Images from my actual upbringing during that time, however, will do just as well: middle-middle class suburbs, California ranch-style tract housing, burgeoning suburban schools, Little League baseball, first-

generation malls (called "shopping centers" back then), and, for some (though not myself) church on Sunday. Dad worked, Mom stayed home. We grew up safe but paranoid, shielded by distance and money from the increasing decay of the major inner cities, shielded by racism from anyone who wasn't white-white-white. Our few token blacks were actually white in style and upbringing. Our smattering of jews and orientals masqueraded as white. Chicanos, Indians, and Arabs didn't even exist.

All these are snapshots from the beloved scrapbook of political conservatives. They deeply believe in and truly long for a return to that way of life. What they see in such memories includes stability (law and order), safety (white-white-white), duty (obedience to authority), industry (unlimited economic growth) and the American Dream (wealth). And why shouldn't they see these qualities in their cherished memories?

America emerged from World War II as the pre-eminent nation among nations. England was exhausted, her resources and wealth used up in "her finest hour," Russia was devastated, with perhaps 30 million dead in a landscape of scorched earth, the Axis powers of Germany and Japan were not merely defeated but utterly destroyed, while much of Europe and the Far East had been ravaged as battlegrounds. America, on the other hand, had been saved by war from a depression it could solve in no other way. Our homeland was unscarred by war — no battles were fought here, no cities destroyed, no civilians killed — and our immense national resources had reached the absolute peak of their economic productivity by war's end. American courage, ingenuity, and materiel had won the day. We were truly the victors, so to us went the spoils.

And, oh, what spoils they were! Like all dominant powers throughout history, our reign was characterized by a self-image of generosity, benevolence, and justice. We were the good guys, God's chosen nation. American Exceptionalism was in full flower during those initial years after World War II. It was clearly our destiny to lead the earth. In our limited mind-set, everyone should have wanted to be just like us Americans, and if, for some unimaginable reason, they *didn't* want to be like us, well, screw 'em, because we had the power to impose ourselves on them and take whatever we wanted.

We saw ourselves as saviors, willing to share our wealth in the Marshall Plan and the economic miracles in post-war Germany and Japan. Indeed, we put the world back on its feet. But for every dollar we gave away, we took back two for ourselves. All our gifts were self-serving.

The perceived threat of world communism loomed when the Soviet Union occupied eastern Europe and closed Berlin. In fact, this was a natural response from a country that had been driven nearly insane by repeatedly brutal invasions from the west. However misguided their methods, the Soviets were not paranoid — they were reacting to protect themselves from a very real history of

aggression. Imagine how we would have reacted if, say, 20 million Americans had died in World War II.

Sadly, the Soviets played right into our hands. They reinforced our belief in our own unquestioned goodness by becoming “the evil empire,” thereby freeing us to grab the moral high ground while simultaneously building an empire of our own. Unlike former imperial empires, ours was economic rather than political. We didn’t need to run other countries; we already owned them. America used the Soviet threat to justify bullying its allies while stealing the third world blind.

We called the shots, dictated the terms, and the whole world funneled its resources into our economy. American business boomed. The creation of Eisenhower’s “military-industrial complex” and the onset of agri-business to feed a starving world produced huge, almost obscene profits. We not only built atomic bombs and missiles, we undertook the largest and most ambitious public works effort ever attempted in recorded history — the Interstate Highway Project — which was not only visionary, but highly profitable in that it linked the automobile and trucking industries to a criss-crossing ribbon of roads that made America one huge, pulsating network of unified commerce.

This is the essential reason why almost any white male in America could become, if not actually wealthy, at least quite comfortable in the two decades following the Second World War. The gravy train was so rich that even incompetent businesses thrived. This was the heyday of American manufacturing, as well as the glory days of the American factory worker. Unemployment was nearly nonexistent. The cost of living was cheap, housing was plentiful, and education was well-funded by an burgeoning tax base.

No wonder family values were so stable. We had the communist threat to keep most of us in line as good little Americans. We had almost total employment; anyone who wanted a job could get a job. The plentiful supply of money combined with low interest rates to produce a housing market that fled the increasingly dirty cities and put up millions of houses in what had been until very recently small farms just beyond the cities, tract houses that were affordable for the average American. And even if you couldn’t afford these new-style suburban houses initially, you could save from what you earned and eventually fulfill the dream of legally securing a clean, safe house of your very own. In the meantime, even a modest provider could support his family.

The fact that much of our wealth came from cannabilizing the rest of the world didn’t bother us, nor was our vision sufficiently far-sighted to realize that this cornucopia could not last forever. We had saved the world from fascism, we were protecting the world from communism, and we were damned pleased with ourselves. If the rest of the world didn’t like it, let them eat cake.

All this is the background against which political and cultural conservatives view the longed for "return to traditional family values." They believe that these values were somehow spiritually inherent in the America of the post-war period, rather than being merely the convenient and chance by-product of a global economic windfall. Was our conspicuous power really the result of our superior values? I would suggest not. On the contrary, it seems to me that our values were the result of our power, both military and economic. Further, I would suggest that the downfall of traditional family values did not represent any particular spiritual fall from grace, but instead was a natural and inevitable reflection of the erosion of our economic power.