

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Cultural Dysfunction in 21st-Century America

One of my favorite columnists is *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. In one of his columns in May he wrote: "In 1966, 86% of college freshmen said that developing a meaningful philosophy of life was essential or very important. Today, less than half say a meaningful philosophy of life is that important. University of Michigan studies suggest that today's students score about 40% lower in measures of empathy than students did 30 years ago." Young adults today are focused less on spiritual or philosophical things than in recent memory. At the very least, it is logical to conclude that cultural dysfunction plays some role in explaining these statistics. It is difficult to be optimistic about such statistics either. Two recent developments in American culture demonstrate the intensifying cultural dysfunction in America and certainly, to some extent, explain why many of our young adults have their feet anchored firmly in midair.

- First, consider the agenda items at this summer's meeting of the National Education Association (NEA), the largest teacher's union in America. It is powerful, well-established and represents what educational leaders think is important to stress in the classroom. One resolution approved by the delegates called for the NEA to support an International Day of Peace Campaign. Another would have the union "educate its members about the environmental and health effects of shale gas fracking." In solidarity with the American Postal Workers Union, the teachers union also resolved to promulgate "a press release utilizing electronic media" to encourage members to boycott Staples, to which the US Postal Office has contracted out work. Delegates likewise debated whether the NEA president should write a letter to Washington Redskins owner Daniel Snyder denouncing the NFL team name as "institutional racism." Further, delegates agreed to draw up a list of books for students pre-K to graduate school, "that have LGBTQ and gender non-conforming themes" and a lobbying campaign for legislation that requires "sensitive and respectful discussions of gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation." They also adopted a resolution to promote "clean energy" in curriculums. Without being cynical, it is quite frankly difficult how these resolutions are relevant to helping children with their math or helping them to read better. In fact, in almost all areas, American children score lower than children from other industrialized nations. At least in terms of its leadership, the NEA seems to be completely out of touch with reality. Its priorities are certainly not those of the broader nation and its decidedly left-wing agenda does little to help children or young adults develop a worldview that bring meaning and

purpose to life. Thankfully, the NEA agenda does not necessarily indicate what all teachers in local school districts are teaching. But the NEA is a powerful lobbying group when it comes to the Democratic Party. There is a clear parallel between the left-wing agenda of the NEA and that of the national Democratic Party.

- Second, consider the national trend of accommodating the culture to the legalization of marijuana. Recently, the editorial page of the *New York Times* argued intensely for the legalization of marijuana and the removal of all penalties against the manufacturing and distribution of marijuana, let alone the possession of marijuana in its many forms. Since late 2012, two states have voted to legalize marijuana for recreational use; licensed shops in Colorado and Washington now sell it to anyone who wants it. Six states have legalized the drug for medicinal use, bringing the total to 23. There are three premises used to justify the legalization of marijuana: (1) it will stop governments from wasting money locking up people who have not really hurt anyone. (2) It will raise tax revenue. (3) It will put criminals out of business. In short, legalizing marijuana expands personal liberty and serves the interests of an expanding government. For example, Colorado expects about \$114 million in taxes and fees during its first year of marijuana legalization. However, columnist Michael Gerson offers a poignant reminder: “Pot is called harmless, though we really have little information on the health and cultural effects of the widespread legal distribution of modern, potent methods of consuming THC (the chemical name [for marijuana]). We do know that the substance is addictive in about one in nine cases (more like one in six when use starts in the teens); that it can make structural changes in portions of the brain controlling emotion and motivation; and that regular use undermines memory, attention span, problem-solving skills and the ability to complete complex tasks. What possible use could these attributes have in a modern economy?” Furthermore, there is little doubt that an expanded legal market in pot also expands the illegal markets for reselling (or giving) it to children and teens. As Gerson comments, “The social message of normalization, of banalization, is intended—and received by young people.” Ironically, about \$40 million of the tax revenue Colorado expects to receive will go for public school construction: “What were once ‘drug-free school zones’ are becoming drug-funded schools.” Our culture has reached a point where parents no longer expect much help from government in reinforcing the cultural, spiritual and ethical norms necessary to raising responsible, successful children. Many states are actually actively undermining those very norms—and the marijuana panacea is a perfect example of just that. As Gerson argues, “Rather than building social competence and capital, politicians increasingly benefit when citizens are addicted, exploited, impoverished and stoned. And that deserves contempt, not applause.”

The current remedy for cultural dysfunction is embracing marijuana in the name of personal liberty and funding expansive government. If one is intellectually honest, it is silly to think that personal liberty is really a compelling reason for marijuana’s legalization.

Common sense would seem to indicate it will actually produce greater personal enslavement. Further, as the various states foster addictive behavior among its citizens, they will in effect be furthering state addiction to revenue from pot. No matter how one views this set of developments, it is difficult to see all of this as a great advancement in civilization. I believe rather confidently that these cultural changes will actually enhance cultural decadence and dysfunction. May God have mercy on us!

See Michel Gerson in www.washingtonpost.com (16 July 2014); *The Economist* (12 July 2014), pp. 25-26; Allysia Finley on the NEA in the *Wall Street Journal* (12-13 July 2014); and David Brooks in the *New York Times* (5 May 2014).