

## Beyond the Alarmed vs. Satisfied Debate

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There is more to the state of the union than the State of the Union. The economy, the health-care system, the government—these are all worthy concerns, but sound policy cannot rest on shaky moral foundations. The cornerstone of our society is a virtuous citizenry. Ultimately, only if people take virtue to heart will we have a society in which children are brought up to be decent, crime is rare, and civility prevails among individuals and among communities of diverse backgrounds.

We asked a list of keen observers of American society to evaluate the moral state of the union. Some sounded the alarms; others, while not outright sunshine boys, declared themselves satisfied overall. The term “satisficer” was coined by Nobel laureate Herbert Simon to indicate that people do not seek utopia. Once they find a satisfactory solution, they stop looking. Indeed, we observe that utopia has proven elusive, and humans can only rationally aspire to imperfection at best. Yet those who are alarmed keep our attention focused and our reforming energy properly honed. A well-functioning community may need both those who occasionally cry wolf even when there is only a threatening shadow, and those who keep their cool even as the first scores of lambs are carried off.

Both the alarmed and the satisficers are looking at the same societal conditions, but some are troubled by a glass half-empty while others celebrate that its contents reach all the way to the mid-point. Thus, some stress that 45 percent of children no longer live with their natural parents, while others see the 55 percent who do. Some see a decline in light drug use by the young; others, the rise in alcoholism.

Many argue that our values are in disarray and that we cannot reach a consensus by which to judge ourselves. However, Americans still subscribe to several core values—it's our behavior that doesn't measure up. Ninety-one percent of Americans believe that marital infidelity is "always wrong" or "almost always wrong," yet extra-marital affairs are common. Eighty-one percent believe they will stay with their spouses for life, yet almost half of all marriages end in divorce. Seventy-eight percent of Americans believe that voting is an important obligation of citizenship, yet the 55 percent voter turnout in the 1992 presidential election marked a high point in recent American history. We are a society that enthusiastically gears up the Jane Fonda tapes, while settling down on the couch to stuff our faces with french fries. In other areas, people don't even pay lip-service to values anymore; students argue that cheating is the only way to survive, and some children shoot other children without even showing remorse.

The alarmist and the satisfied approaches *together* produce a balanced picture: American society is surely not going to hell in a handbasket, but it does have some very serious moral defects. Indeed, if our moral foundations had disintegrated, there would be little to build on. *The time to take stock of the situation and to act is when the foundations are eroding but have not yet crumbled, which, this issue of The Responsive Community suggests, is our current state.*

In evaluating our moral condition, our conclusions depend largely on what social scientists call the base-line: what we take as our point of comparison. Compared to the mid-1890s, the U.S., by many accounts, has made much moral progress. When we compare ourselves, on the other hand, to the mid-1950s, the picture becomes more complex. Americans may thus congratulate themselves on the long-run achievements yet be properly troubled by the recent wide-spread decay.

The argument that the U.S. is "cleaner" than most European societies, not to mention numerous others, or that we are generally more sensitive to moral concerns, does provide Americans with a reputation we should be proud to uphold. But one should hardly use this observation to dismiss concern about the violent crime and drug use that has sharply risen over the last decades. Even if by some

accounts crime rates have “stabilized” or experienced a slight recent decline, they are still intolerable. The city of Chicago alone loses roughly as many lives to violence as does all of Canada. And even if the use of illegal drugs has declined among high school seniors, it has risen among eighth graders. This may not be a “satisficing” state for most of us.

Particularly troubling is the notion that moral values change over time, and our moral yardstick should adjust to fit current mores. Viewed this way, pregnancies of twelve-year-old children will soon be shrugged off, and we will no longer be able to ask whether “outdated” notions, say of children waiting to mature and marry before they have children, are still virtuous. We’ve seen this “instant field goal” trick before—if you don’t make it into the end zone, just bring the end zone to wherever you happen to have landed.

If we agree with one another that moral commitments must be shored up, it might be best to rely on heightened levels of moral sensibilities (as we have developed toward the environment, race relations, women, and the disadvantaged) rather than on vastly diluted standards. The societal role of moral values is to agitate against forces that undermine civility and the social order, not to make virtue out of vice.

Finally, we do not hold any one societal trend or belief system single-handedly accountable for our current state. The suggestion that communitarians blame all our contemporary problems on excessive individualism is simplistic. Clearly, the expressive individualism of the 1970s and the elevation of greed and Me-ism into moral principles in the 1980s together constitute one factor contributing to our condition. But no one could seriously consider it the only factor. The communitarian agenda of shoring up our moral, social, and political foundations is much more encompassing. It stresses, for instance, the need to limit the flow of private funds into the campaign chests of elected officials. And we are as concerned about handguns as we are about selfishness.

Suggestions on what should be done and how to proceed are particularly welcome. The essays assembled here, far from providing closure on the subject, seek to further the debate, to be extended in future issues of this journal: What is the moral state of the union and what is to be done?