

KARMA AND CHARACTER

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In a recent column entitled “Character is Destiny,” William Safire claims that the Republicans won the election because they embodied the true spirit of America’s national character. The GOP, says Safire, demonstrates a “sharply defined character” in its “mission to defeat terror while exporting freedom abroad, and a policy to restrain taxes while increasing social spending at home” (*New York Times*, 1-12-05). (Was there a misprint in the last six words?!)

Paragons of virtue are widely and indisputably admired. No reasonable person, for example, would doubt the impeccable character of Jesus or the Buddha, or, on a more mundane level, Jimmy Carter. The problem with America’s national character is that we have, since the end of World War II, have gradually lost the universal recognition that good character requires.

Nations are of course not persons, and they can be just as conflicted and full of vice as any individual can be. Our principal failing in the Cold War was the vice of hypocrisy. We usually had no compunction in supporting oppressive, undemocratic regimes if they joined us against the Soviets.

The most cynical example of this was our support for the Contras against a democratically elected government in Nicaragua. Remember Ollie North, who sold missiles to Iran to finance the Contras, even though we were supporting Saddam Hussein at the same time? And why do the Iranians dislike us? Because in 1953 the CIA overthrew an Iranian Social Democrat whom they thought would be friendly to the Russians.

In the good old days American character, at least in my family, was defined as hard work, thrift, pay as you go, and above all, and fulfilling basic needs rather than frivolous desires. When I was a kid, my brother and I did not get to eat watermelon until it was one cent a pound!

Once praised for their fiscal conservatism, Republicans have done nothing to reverse our private savings rate, the lowest in the industrialized world, and our ballooning trade and budget deficits. Individual Americans who do not save, neglect their basic needs, and live beyond their means are obviously not persons of good character, and neither is a nation that develops these vices.

I offer you a playground analogy. The bad guys and their biker chicks are well contained in one corner of playground. The good students, inspired by European exchange students, do a good job, with the help of their vice principle, of disciplining them when they act up. But there is one student who can’t contain himself. His religion requires that he must smite the evil doers. So he goes over and picks a fight with one of the bad guys, and all Hell breaks loose. Now I ask you: would you say that this guy had good character and judgment?

The motto “character is destiny” is based on the simple moral rule that “you reap what you sow.” Buddhists and Hindus call this karma, and karma is nothing but the law of causality applied to the moral realm. The Buddha once said that “they who know causality know the Dharma.” What this means is that if you are mindful of how your actions affect yourself and others, then you will know what you ought to do. It also means that you develop the virtues at an early age, your good character will destine you to a good life.

Democrats lost the election in part because they were perceived to be less supportive of moral values. And if liberals continue to claim that values do not matter, and that all we need to talk about is economic and social issues, we will continue to lose elections.

I believe it is a great shame that we have let the conservatives take the character education issue as their own. I’m now beginning to work with the Kellogg School District on a virtues curriculum, one that will teach our children that integrity, compassion, justice, and courage do not belong to political parties, but to all human beings.