

A Word from London

Herbert London

Herbert London is president of the Hudson Institute and is John M. Olin Professor of Humanities at N.Y.U.

The Decline of National Symbols

While it is often said that symbols which unite various people are on the wane, personal symbols, arguably frivolous symbols, are still very much in vogue. Consumers are seemingly willing to invest twice the price for a typical white shirt that has an embossed polo player on it. Surely less than one-half of one percent of those wearing these shirts play polo.

Similarly, people often attach insignias to blazers that suggest they are members of the Queen's guard or the royal constabulary or a regiment band, when, in fact, they are not guards, policemen or musicians.

Symbols can unite and even confer a sense of pride, but in the examples I've employed they are largely decorative, detached from the meaning these symbols might have once conveyed.

Even corporate logos have lost their importance, albeit the Mercedes emblem has a certain cachet and, as a consequence, holding power.

Symbolism is in serious decline wherever the nation state has lost its appeal. When patriotism doesn't captivate, symbolism of the state is resisted.

Brussels bureaucrats, intent on imposing union on Europeans separated through language, culture and history, have declared war against national symbols. Chancellor Schroeder of Germany has already announced with total conviction that "the day of nation state is over." What will replace it is a vague creed of regionalism and transnationalism.

Already there is a European union effort to erase from public view all emblems that speak to national identity. One nation under God is a concept fast fading into obscurity.

Local symbols will continue to exist as long as they challenge national symbols. After all, the nation state is the enemy for continental unionists.

In the United States a discernible loss of patriotic sentiment has led to flag burning and symbol defacement. One is as likely to see the flag used as a pajama pattern as a national symbol flying in front of a home.

Symbols of city football teams are popular, but they do not unify all the people. A sense of overarching symbolism is lost on a generation that doesn't say the Pledge of Allegiance or sing the Star Spangled Banner. Federalism is more than a system of shared political power between the states and the federal government. It is now a manifestation of local over national fealty.

Where this will end is already apparent: a loss of national sentiment, an unwillingness to sacrifice for the common good, an abiding suspicion of govern-

ment and self-deprecating humor.

Where once there was an Ugly American now there is an Embarrassed American. Despite extraordinary wealth and military strength unparalleled since the Roman Empire, Americans are suffering from a lack of confidence. The loss of national symbols is both a symptom and a manifestation of this condition.

The Super Bowl is a more prominent event in American life than a Memorial Day parade. Washington's and Lincoln's birthdays have been conflated into President's Day.

And July 4th is thought of as the start of summer rather than Independence Day.

The Confederate flag has been consigned to ignominy since it is more closely associated with slavery than the heroism of Southern troops. During the Vietnam War the American flag suffered a similar fate.

Pseudo-sophisticates will ask what difference does the loss of national symbols make. Relying on a cynical perception the answer is "not much." Yet it is true that a symbol is an expression of the nation's vitality; it can be the embodiment of unity and it can offer uplifting spiritual content.

A life without symbols is significantly diminished. The family crest unites the present with the past. Similarly, a nation is diminished without symbols which unify and provide allegiance.

We are not yet totally rational beings who find symbols unnecessary. My suspicion is that humanity needs symbols in order to give the unexplained meaning.

Should national symbols be marginalized or even disappear, we would all be the worse for it. The path to transnationalism would be made irresistible, unencumbered as Americans become citizens of the world with unclear loyalties and a loss of distinctive national virtue.

A Man Without Character

The Clinton years are over, but reflections on his presidency have only just begun. Adjectives already fill the media air: sanctimonious, enigmatic, bright, difficult, volatile, amoral. Not one by itself captures the man.

However, the last several actions taken by President Clinton in office reveal what none of these words convey. By accepting Independent Counsel Robert Ray's plea bargain and then issuing eleventh hour pardons to several notorious figures, President Clinton revealed what many suspected: he was a president thoroughly lacking in character.

In accepting a plea bargain history will understand Clinton's admission of guilt. He essentially copped a perjury plea.

His "agreed order of discipline" with the Arkansas Supreme Court Committee on Professional Conduct states that "Mr. Clinton admits and acknowledges, and the Court therefore finds" that "he knowingly gave evasive and misleading answers" in an attempt to cover up his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. In so doing he "engaged in conduct that is prejudicial to the administration of justice."

All of the disclaimers by Mr. David Kendall and his other attorneys cannot erase this obvious admission from the historical record. Clinton admitted that he

gave false testimony and that will stand for the ages.

Having lied to his colleagues, one might guess that over time he will lie to the press in his post-presidential years. Some, like his loud-mouth apologist James Carville, will claim that the Republican party was out to get Clinton, but the emerging reality is that a character flaw was the explanation for the former president's undoing.

Had Clinton admitted his perjury two years earlier, before the threat of indictment hung over his head, he might have saved himself the embarrassment history will level against him. He might have also saved the country from the wrenching discussion of his indiscretion. But this is indeed a man without character.

To make matters worse, on the former president's last day in office he issued 176 pardons, including those to Susan Rosenberg, a former Weather Underground member, and Marc Rich, wanted for evading \$46 million in taxes.

Ms. Rosenberg was a suspect in the Brink's robbery in which two police officers and a guard were killed in 1981. She was initially charged with a role in the heist, but the charges were dropped by the U.S. Attorney Giuliani after she was sentenced to 58 years for the possession of 700 pounds of explosives for making bombs and weapons.

Marc Rich has been on the wanted list for seventeen years on charges of evading taxes and making oil deals with Iran while American hostages were still held in Teheran. Rich fled to Switzerland where he lives in luxury. He has not spent a day in prison.

Giuliani, who handled both cases, was shocked and angry with the president's pardons. Clinton's former communications director George Stephanopoulos called the actions "outrageous." And the relatives of police Sergeant Edward O'Grady, one of the two cops killed in the Brink's robbery, were appalled by the president's pardon. "It's a disgrace" said Don Butterworth, a PBA officer with the Orangetown police.

Some, such as former Mayor Ed Koch, contend the pardons "were a favor for a fundraiser." While the evidence is not clear, Denise Rich—Marc's former wife—did contribute more than \$600,000 to the Democratic party. Whether this contribution was the motivation for the pardon is impossible to determine, but the very fact a leading Democrat would suggest as much reveals a great deal about Clinton's reputation.

Since Clinton has been exposed as a person long on denial and short on truth, he will portray himself as a victim rather than the prime creator of his legal woe. He will try, in time, to rewrite history. He will continue to cast verbal stones at his detractors.

But the more he says, the more it will be apparent that whatever adjective is used to describe President Clinton none will be as accurate as the words "a man without character."

My Yiddishe Mama

My mother died on December 3, 2000. Her age, always a matter of great secrecy, will not be revealed here. What can be revealed is that she was the quintessential “yiddishe mama.”

She could be judgmental, sometimes arbitrary, but she sacrificed in ways the modern woman can neither understand nor appreciate.

When she was fifteen she was obliged to drop out of high school so she could help her brother go to college. She never complained about this sacrifice, although she resented her brother’s high-handedness and lack of appreciation.

When she married at age twenty-three she found her perfect mate. He adored her and she would do anything for him. When they had an infrequent argument, they would walk on the boardwalk at Brighton Beach and the controversy would fade away.

Contrary to the modern woman, she made very few demands on her husband. Clothes weren’t important, even appearance wasn’t critical. My mother didn’t enter a beauty parlor while my father was alive; subsequently she went twice at my urging. She had so much “natural beauty,” my father would say. Besides, they couldn’t afford it.

When I was born all her energies, her devotion and limited patience were focused on me. Since her dream of being a singer and actress wasn’t realized, she had high hope that I would be the next Clark Gable.

On several occasions she took me to a movie theater to see Clark Gable and Joan Crawford double features during the school day. When my father objected, she would say, “it’s part of his training.”

When I was in high school playing basketball my mom could never understand the purpose of boys running around in shorts with a beachball.

Years later when I was playing at Columbia, I finally persuaded my mom to come to a home game against Princeton. In the first few minutes I went up for a rebound only to get hit with a flailing elbow. I called time out and rubbed my eyes as the coach asked if I was okay.

At that moment in the huddle I heard a familiar voice. My mom left the stands concerned that I was hurt. “What happened to your eye?” she inquired. I wasn’t hurt, but I sure was embarrassed. Whether it was in front of 5000 fans or no one, she was determined to take care of her boy. By the way, it took weeks for the redness in my cheeks to disappear.

We didn’t have any money, albeit I didn’t know we were poor. During a smallpox scare mom took me to Coney Island hospital for a vaccination. The nurse who dispensed the shot asked if I shared a room with a sibling. My mom replied that I didn’t have a sibling but we all slept in the same room. “Oh” said the nurse, “you don’t have to pay for the shot.” At that point my mother said indignantly, “we don’t take charity, tell me how much it costs and I’ll pay.”

She was a lifelong F.D.R. Democrat. In fact, Roosevelt had been apotheosized into a demigod. When I changed my party affiliation in the 1980s, arguing that Roosevelt’s party had abandoned its principles, she scolded me and called my

decision a *shanda*. As the years passed her politics became increasingly conservative, but she had a hard time pulling a Republican lever.

Her pleasures in life were simple. After my father died she would read voraciously, paint when she felt moved to do so and made up word games. She could make hundreds of words by moving around the letters in “strawberry.” She wasn’t the Mah Jong or Bridge playing type. And she hated to talk to *ventas*.

No matter how busy my professional life became, I called every day. I realized she looked forward to the call even if I didn’t have much to report. “So what’s new?” she would ask. “Not much” I replied, “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

When I brought my family to Florida on one of our regular visits, she was prepared. The chicken soup she made was in the freezer and her unparalleled mandel bread was on the kitchen table. She knew what we liked. Of course, we heard about the ordeal of preparation and the *kvetch* went on for the first thirty minutes of our reunion, but she took enormous satisfaction when we *fressed*.

After my father died in 1974 she talked frequently of their reunion. “I don’t mind dying; at least I’ll see my Jack again.” It was a comment I never encouraged.

Mom was the anchor in my life. With all the vicissitudes, the highs and lows, the moments of triumph and defeat, she was there—the one cheerleader whose support was unequivocal.

In a world where selfishness is a virtue and self-fulfillment the principle that undergirds new age men and women, my mom stands apart. She knew how to sacrifice. With her loss I’m adrift in a sea of furious waves and unseen buoys.

After she passed away I found a paper on which all of the directions for her burial were laid out. Even in death she didn’t want to be a burden. She would undoubtedly have said to her neighbors, “My son is a busy man.”

I want to reach for that phone, for the daily call. But I won’t hear that voice of genuine concern again. She is the last of a breed, the consummate *yiddishe mama*. As long as I live I will never forget what she was willing to do for me.

Teachers Who Do Not Make the Grade

There is a dirty secret about public education: those entrusted with educating the youth of America were often among the nation’s marginal students.

Several years ago a report indicated that many Suffolk County teachers could not pass a simple literacy test.

Years earlier many Texas teachers failed a statewide competency test described at the time as “rudimentary.”

A study of North Carolina teachers revealed that average S.A.T. scores in this population were well below those required for admissions to the University of North Carolina.

Perhaps the most serious indictment came out of New York City where six out of ten teachers regularly flunked their own certification exam even after taking prep courses paid for by the Board of Education.

Of the 118 uncertified teachers who took subsidized courses at City College in 2000, 70 flunked one or both of the exams required for teaching licenses—a 59

percent failure rate.

Most of those who failed are presently teaching in New York City schools. Teachers have five years to pass the certification exams for a permanent license. One exam is in the liberal arts and science and the other in classroom skills.

Many of those who enrolled in the subsidized classes had only one more chance to pass the exam before losing their jobs. It is instructive that all teachers taking the special prep program had received a “satisfactory job rating” from their principals.

As might be anticipated, Board of Education officials stressed the 40 percent who had finally passed the exam rather than the 60 percent who failed.

Professor Albert Posamentier, dean of the City College teaching program acknowledged that it is a “sad state” when so many teachers cannot pass a simple competency exam.

What remains unanswered is why those who repeatedly fail the exam are allowed to remain in the classroom at all. There are presently 12,000 uncertified teachers in the New York City school system—about twelve percent of the teaching workforce.

Admittedly it is difficult to find qualified teachers in some fields such as bilingual education but as the exam results reveal, many unlicensed instructors do not have sufficient familiarity with the English language. Among the teachers who failed were several who had Master’s degrees from teachers’ colleges.

These results could presage a difficult period for the city school system. In 2003 a law goes into effect which bars anyone from teaching who hasn’t passed the certification exam, with the corollary condition that emergency waivers offered by the state education commissioner would be eliminated.

In effect thousands of teachers will be forced out of the system at the same time a wave of retirements will occur. This combination will result in a need to hire forty to fifty thousand new teachers over the next five years.

The critical issue, arguably the most critical issue in education, is recruiting competent teachers for school systems across the country. While the publicity given the deficiencies in public education have aroused public concern, the practical need to find competent teachers remains unchanged.

Forty-one states have introduced alternative certification requirements for teachers which, in most cases, obviate the need for Mickey Mouse education courses.

But as I see it a national campaign is required to identify retired military officers, housewives who want to return to the workforce, and many talented people seeking an alternative to their present occupation for the teaching profession.

I recently met a former securities trader who, while having a seven figure income, gave it up to teach history to high school students. As he noted, “the psychic pleasure I get from teaching is more significant than the money I once earned.”

In order for people like this fellow to be recruited, the arbitrary bureaucratic rules that encumber teaching must be removed. Certification requirements should stress knowledge more than pedagogy. And teacher salaries should be related to student performance.

It makes little sense to escalate standards when so many incompetent teachers are in our school system. What the nation needs at the moment is a systematic effort to encourage the best and the brightest to teach our future employees, businessmen and women and the next generation of leaders.

Without that effort all the talk about instrumental change through charter schools and voucher plans will be little more than a summer breeze on the educational winds of change. Ω

The St. Croix Review

Post Office Box 244, Stillwater, Minnesota 55082

The *St. Croix Review* is published bimonthly by Religion and Society, an educational foundation. Subscriptions are by membership in the foundation and are \$30 per year, \$50 for two years. Gift subscriptions and associate memberships for college students cost \$20. Contributions in excess of memberships are tax-deductible and are used to enlarge our circulation.

Name _____

Street _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Please send gift subscriptions to: (please enclose list of names)

I would like to make a contribution to *The St. Croix Review*.

Check Enclosed Visa Mastercard

No. _____ Exp. Date ____ / ____

To place your order by phone, please call 1-800-278-0141

Fax (651) 439-7017 * Website: stcroixreview.com

This journal believes:

- * The federal government of the United States is too large.
- * Governments, like individuals, should live within their budgets.
- * A market economy is the only way to ensure prosperity and is harmonious with human nature.
- * We should preserve the values of Western Civilization: the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions.