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EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## TRUTH IN LOVE

### The Content of Our Character

By Parris J. Baker  
August 2023

In 2022, the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research[1] reported public confidence in the Supreme Court dropped from 26% to 18% (those having a great deal of confidence). Though it offers only advisory opinions, the Code of Conduct for United States Judges[2] has five guiding principles or canons:

1. Canon 1: A Judge should uphold the integrity and independence of the Judiciary.
2. Canon 2: A Judge should avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety in all activities.
3. Canon 3: A Judge should perform the duties of the Office fairly, impartially, and diligently.
4. Canon 4: A Judge may engage in extrajudicial activities that are consistent with the obligations of Judicial Office.
5. Canon 5: A Judge should refrain from political activity.

Ironically, as Americans debate the motivations of the recent Supreme Court decision to reverse affirmative action,[3] trust and confidence in the Supreme Court is at an all-time historic low. Lack of confidence is primarily related to the recent *Dobbs v. Jackson*[4] decision to overrule both *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992) and issues of ethic improprieties and questionable character centered on two central Supreme Court Justices, John G. Roberts, Jr., Chief Justice of the United States, and Clarence Thomas, Associate

Justice and their wives, Jane Sullivan Roberts, and Virginia “Ginni” Thomas respectively.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed in the greatness of America and often spoke of its potential and the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. However, he also underscored the necessity to resist the tyranny of “vicious racists,” such as Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connors and George Corley Wallace. During his immortal I Have a Dream speech, “The Drum Major”[5] for peace and justice articulated the importance of character with this iconic phrase:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

The meaning of that iconic phrase has been debated for decades. From entrenched conservative commentator, who possess fortified ideologies that dismiss race as a factor that directly impacts personal achievement and success, to staunch liberal pundits, just as determined, who continue to promote well-established race-based philosophies of civil rights, affirmative action, and reparations, which group is right? I’m not sure, but I am confident that truth will emerge if the deliberations persist.

An often-used quote by John Stuart Mills succinctly makes my point: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”[6] What we must struggle to accomplish is to simply talk civilly to each other. The critical issue is not who wins the political or ideological debate, but the political, physical, and psychological distance created when we don’t talk humanely to each other. Differences in opinion, policy, or political strategies are not nearly as destructive to America as the erosion of relationships and living in a segregated community.

From time to time, the character of our nation has been challenged by enemies, “foreign and domestic.” Several historically challenging periods for our nation have been the following:

- Revolutionary War (1776)
- Dred Scott Supreme Court decision (1857)
- Civil War (1861-1865)
- Plessey v. Ferguson (Separate but Equal Doctrine) Supreme Court decision (1896)
- McCarthyism or Hooverism (1940s and 1950s)
- Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas Supreme Court decision (1954)
- Watergate Scandal (1972-1974)
- Bill Clinton’s Affair (1995-1997)
- September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States
- Insurrection at the U.S. Capitol Building (January 6, 2021).

Our nation is once again faced with key inflection points. How we advance as a nation will reflect the present character of our country and the character of the individuals charged with governing this nation. Character is defined as a group of traits, qualities, or personality features, such as mental, moral, and spiritual attributes, that are distinctive to an individual or group. Our nation has already faced key inflection points or defining moments that have challenged and revealed both the character of our nation and the heart of our people.

I believe that America can only be great when we move beyond the reification of democracy; the symbolism found in waving American flags, standing for the National Anthem, and uttering the name of Jesus. We must hold accountable those individuals who are entrusted to execute democracy. Moreover, we must demand that each entrusted servant execute democracy with proper deportment of love, virtue, and truth rooted in democratic values. In these unprecedented times, we must forgo partisan politics, electoral theatrics, and smooth rhetoric that tickles our fancies.

Our country seems to be obsessed with engaging in political hyperbole, social aggrandizement and a bent toward national sensationalism. We must honestly confront this reality: We are living in a diminishing democratic nation, with individuals capriciously communicating their desire to move America toward an autocratic system of government; and that we have elected a lot of broken, unfit, and sometimes extremely dangerous people. We cannot remain silent.



Courage and comfort are incompatible companions. Few individuals possess both characteristics so one must choose. Mary Ellen Pleasant was one of those courageous individuals who understood the necessity of choice and why she had to sacrifice personal comfort. A self-made millionaire by 1865, Ms. Pleasant used her social position and economic power to provide aid to freedom-

seeking African Americans. Ms. Pleasant clearly articulated her perspective on slavery and the confrontation of oppression: “You know my cause well. My cause was the cause of freedom and equality for myself and for my people and I’d rather be a corpse than a coward.”

History has taught us (and hopefully we have learned) that to seek solace by remaining silent provides space for tyrants to speak. Then, out of fear of the oppressor, the words of the tyrant are repeated by those less courageous; thus, allowing tyranny to triumph in the face of timidity. “Sometimes it seems like to tell the truth today is to run the risk of being killed, asserts Fannie Lou Hamer.<sup>[7]</sup> “But if I fall, I’ll fall feet four inches forward in the fight for freedom. I’m not backing off.”

- [1] AP-NORC at the University of Chicago: [Here](#)
- [2] Guide to Judicial Policy Vol. 2: Ethics and Judicial Conduct. Pt. A Codes of Conduct. [Here](#)
- [3] Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College. Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. No. 20–1199. Argued October 31, 2022—Decided June 29, 2023. [Here](#)
- [4] Dobbs, State Health Officer of the Mississippi Department of Health, et al. v. Jackson Women’s health Organization et al. Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. No. 19 – 1392. Argued December 1, 2021 – Decided June 24, 2022. [Here](#)
- [5] King, Jr., M. L. (February 14, 1968). “The Drum Major Instinct.” Sermon delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church. In *A Knock at Midnight*, ed. Carson and Holloran, 1998. New York: Warner Books, Inc.
- [6] John Stuart Mills who delivered the following original statement in an 1867 inaugural address at the University of St. Andrews: “Let not anyone pacify his conscience by the delusion that he can do no harm if he takes no part and forms no opinion. Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing. He is not a good man who, without a protest, allows wrong to be committed in his name, and with the means which he helps to supply, because he will not trouble himself to use his mind on the subject.”
- [7] Fannie Lou Hamer was an advocate, for voting and women’s’ rights and an influential voice in the Civil Rights movement.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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