

HAPPY NEWS FOR A HAPPY YEAR By Si Frumkin goodnews.doc 12/07

I have some good – and quite unexpected – information to share with you. It has to do with pessimism that I – and many, maybe most, other Americans - had developed about the American society over the last two decades. I am sure that you too have looked back on the “good old days” when crime was less than it is now, language and entertainment were less obscene, children were better behaved and most of had confidence of a better future and a better world for all.

Then, in the mid-80s, there was a gradual awareness of decline of our society. This prompted dozens of serious studies and books by social scientists who saw America’s national decline as an unavoidable result of unparalleled growth, economic expansion and demoralizing prosperity. Conservative commentators concentrated especially on the areas of crime, welfare dependency, illegitimacy and increased tolerance of the drug culture.

In 1993, a leading social scientist, William J. Bennett, released the “*The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*”, one of the more influential studies of contemporary American society. In it he documented the “substantial social regression” in the U.S. by showing that since 1960 there had been a 500% increase in violent crime; a more than 400% increase in out-of-wedlock births; almost a tripling of the percentage of children on welfare; a doubling of the divorce rate; and a decline of more than 70 points in the SAT scores!

Neither Bennet nor anyone else presented any meaningful ways to halt this decline. In 1996, Robert Bork, the conservative scholar and unsuccessful nominee by president Reagan for the Supreme Court, wrote in his “*Slouching Towards Gomorrah*”: “These pathologies were easy to fall into and will be very difficult to climb out of. There is, in fact, no agreement about how to cure them. It may be, that a democratic nation will be unable to take the measures necessary.”

But now, a strange thing has happened. In a thoroughly researched study, published in the December 2007 “*Commentary*”, professors Peter Wehner and Yuval Levin show that things began to turn around about fifteen years ago and that by now improvements are clearly visible in the vast majority of social indicators.

Good news indeed. Here are some of them:

Between 1993 and 2005, rates of violent and property crime fell to their lowest level since 1993. Teenage drug use that had been climbing throughout the 1990s has since then declined by over 23% overall - use of ecstasy, LSD and methamphetamine dropped by about 50%, steroids by 20%. Since 1994, the national welfare load has declined by over 60% - every state has reduced its case load by at least 30%, some by as much as 90%. Since the 1996 welfare reform bill, overall poverty, child poverty, black child poverty and child hunger have all decreased and employment for single mothers has risen.

Abortions that had reached 1.6 million in 1990 have dropped to 1.3 million annually, the lowest since the 1973 Supreme Court abortion legalization. The divorce rate is at its lowest level since 1970. Educational scores are up: this year the 4th and 8th graders have improved in math and reading, 12th-graders history achievements have risen and Black and Hispanic students are making broad gains (even though significant gaps with whites still persist).

Youth behavior is changing as well. The birth rate for teenagers aged 15-19 has decreased by 35% since its peak in 1991. Teenage sexual intercourse has declined by over 10%. Teen use of alcohol has dropped by 10% to 35% - depending on the grade level – since 1996. The percentage of teenagers smoking daily has also declined.

The director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, John P. Walters, has summarized this trend: “We have a broad set of behaviors by young people that are going in the right direction.”

We are on the way but we are not there yet. Our popular culture remains a cesspool of violence and vulgarity. Out-of-wedlock births are at an all-time high of 37%. Marriage rates have declined by almost half since 1970. Since in the life of any society, the place of a family is central these statistics are very significant and troubling. Still, the good news cannot and should not be ignored.

What caused this unexpected turnaround? An exact analysis is difficult if not impossible, but surely the change in laws ending welfare as an entitlement is an important factor. The revolution in crime enforcement that was started by Rudolph Giuliani, chief William Bratton and scholars like James Q. Wilson has played a major role. A novel and critical step in drug control efforts was focusing public awareness on the explicitly moral argument that drug use does not enhance and improve human

character but rather degrades and destroys it. Pro-life arguments bore fruit in getting Americans aged 18 to 30 to become the group most opposed to abortion.

Culture exhibits an ebb and flow just like economics, and words are signals as well as tools of that change. I believe that it is significant and encouraging that a word that has never been an important part of our political discourse is becoming central in judging political programs and prospective leaders. The word is “values” and as long as values play a role in assessing the good and the bad of our society there will always be hope.

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