

# Camp\*aign Response

To: Sep 7, 2009, NY Times OPED, “The Bloody Crossroads” (text on p. 3)

September 8, 2009

Dear David,

I have very good news but, as with a relieved tummy ache, it stems from a spoon of castor oil.

Your question, “Can the state do anything to effectively promote virtuous behavior?” is of particular interest to me as head of a non-profit agency. Our goal is instill highly-desired behaviors (per universally accepted standards) in human beings while they are “instillable,” as it were. The answer to your question is, “**absolutely YES!**”

But merely promoting virtuous behavior does not guarantee its survival. The road to societal hell is paved with unsustainable results. Before spreading a purchase of expensive seed, first be sure the field is prepared, rich, black, and moist. It is the medium that either allows good seed to flourish, or else keeps it from emerging. Similarly, the array of values we recognize in others as virtuous behavior also requires a nourishing medium in order to become firmly established.

Seven years ago, as a result of the “Beltway Sniper” incident, our group launched a movement, adopting the battle-cry, “*The reality of virtue before virtual reality!*” We broadcast the obvious: “to cultivate neurologically ‘soft-wired’ little ones by images of violence, selfishness, and greed, is to produce like-minded adults.” This is particularly true for children during the critical determining years of neurobehavioral development.

Today, America, the land of the free, holds the world record for having the most adults behind bars. Due to overcrowding, prisoners are now being graduated early into society to make room for fresh matriculants. Worst of all, statistics show that at least 70% of children with an incarcerated parent will also end up behind bars. (Do the math – see the future).

Now, consider the soil into which our young are delivered and then raised. America has become the preeminent consumer society, wherein the pursuit of happiness is nearly tantamount to wanting, getting and selling. Thus, our medium and context. The way to determine whether any medium is nourishing - or not - is by the nature of its produce. To be sure, the combined increases in campus shootings, suicides, dropouts and classroom chaos among American youth are a telltale, foul-smelling sign of bad soil.

While capitalism is not the God-ordained model of perfection that many had hoped, it remains the best tool in the shed. But beware! That one tool is capable of both cultivating the vine and severing its roots. It can visit great wealth and unending despair upon different members of the same family. It is neither good nor bad per se; it does what it does without remorse or pleasure. It is merely a tool.

That said, if its inherent dangers are ignored, the logical end of a consumer-driven society is that it will eventually consume -- its own young. Thus, your note that, “over the years, business and government have become more intertwined. The results have been bad for both capitalism and government.” While the answer to the original question is, “YES!” for the answer to, “How?” see [www.ForAmericanKids.org](http://www.ForAmericanKids.org)

Sincerely,



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**The Camp\*aign for American Kids:** a little change .... *for a WHOLE life!*

**For the full text of “*The Bloody Crossroads*,” see next page.**

# The New York Times

## The Bloody Crossroads

By DAVID BROOKS  
Published September 7, 2009

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In 1965, Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Daniel Bell started a magazine called The Public Interest. Their idea was that the great ideological clashes between socialism and capitalism were in the past. In the age of consensus what was needed was a policy journal that would pragmatically weigh costs and benefits.

But as the years went by, they ran up against the limits of technocratic thinking. They found that they could not escape the murky depths of character, culture and morality. “At root, in almost every area of public concern,” James Q. Wilson wrote in the 20th anniversary issue, “we are seeking to induce persons to act virtuously, whether as schoolchildren, applicants to public assistance, would-be lawbreakers, or voters and public officials.”

The Public Interest closed in 2005, when the last of the original editors, Irving Kristol, retired. It left a gaping hole. Fortunately, a new quarterly magazine called [National Affairs](#) is starting up today to continue the work. The magazine, edited by Yuval Levin, occupies the same ground: the bloody crossroads where social science and public policy meet matters of morality, culture and virtue.

The first essay concerns a great test of American national character. Today, James C. Capretta argues, America’s leaders are in the same position that General Motors’s executives were in a decade or two ago. The nation has made a series of lavishly unaffordable promises. The legacy costs are piling up. By the end of 2019, the nation’s debt will soar to 82 percent of G.D.P. — and that’s without new programs and before the full fiscal impact of the boomer retirements.

Creating a new and sustainable middle-class social contract isn’t only an accounting matter. It’s also a question of responsibility — whether Americans are willing to face the costs of their choices, and refrain from stealing from their grandchildren.

The challenge isn’t deciding whether to control spending, but how, in a democratic system, to pull it off. One answer is that we should smash through the special interests and hand power directly to the people. That’s been tried in California, and, unfortunately, the consequences are disastrous. As Troy Senik points out in his essay, the California Constitution gives voters relatively direct control over fiscal decisions. The result is that Californians have voted to tax themselves like libertarians and subsidize themselves like socialists.

California is in a fiscal meltdown. Direct democracy didn't stifle the special interests; it empowered them. Because of union power, California can't fire teachers — even one who was found with pornography, pot and cocaine in school. California teachers are among the best paid in the country, while the schools are among the worst.

The other alternative is to concentrate power and let public-policy professionals make the hard choices. But as Wilfred M. McClay argues, even highly trained experts get caught up in manias and groupthink — as the failure to anticipate the economic crisis shows.

Luigi Zingales points out that the legitimacy of American capitalism has rested on the fact that many people, like Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, got rich on the basis of what they did, not on the basis of government connections. But over the years, business and government have become more intertwined. The results have been bad for both capitalism and government. The banks' growing political clout led to the rule changes that helped create the financial crisis.

If we can't trust the people and we can't trust the elites, who can we trust? How can change be effectuated? This is one of the problems National Affairs is going to have to think through in the years ahead.

Another is: Can the state do anything to effectively promote virtuous behavior? Because when you get into the core problems, whether in Washington, California or on Wall Street, you keep seeing the same moral deficiencies: self-indulgence, irresponsibility and imprudence.

Two of my favorite essays in the first issue go right at this problem. Ron Haskins delivers a careful reading of the data on inequality and social mobility and cuts through a lot of the sloppy reporting on this issue. He points out that the surest way to achieve mobility is still the same: get married, get a degree, hold on to a job. "Poverty in America is a function of culture and behavior at least as much as of entrenched injustice," he writes. But how does government alter culture?

At the end of the issue, Leon R. Kass delivers an unforgettable article on why he decided to give up a career in the sciences to devote himself to the humanities. It nicely captures the spirit of the magazine — the fierce desire to see the human whole, to be aware of people as spiritual beings and not economic units or cogs in a technocratic policy machine.

In a world of fever swamp politics and arid, overly specialized expertise, National Affairs arrives at just the right time.