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"Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win great triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."

—Theodore Roosevelt

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Editorial

Matters of Life and Death

On March 12, the first of two trials in the 1999 murder of 13-year-old Jesse Dirkhising began in Bentonville, Arkansas. Except for the Associated Press and the local *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, the news media hasn't mentioned the story at all.

In fact, news coverage of the Dirkhising case has been strangely muted since the boy was discovered bound and gagged in September three years ago. The homicide, you see, is politically sensitive. Dirkhising's admitted killers are a gay couple who say that the boy's death was a case of statutory rape "gone wrong."

According to prosecutors, the two men, who had become friendly with the Dirkhising family, invited Jesse over for the day. They then drugged him, tied him to a bed, gagged him with his underwear and duct tape, and then proceeded to rape him for hours with a variety of objects. He was left on the bed to slowly suffocate to death. Two police officers testified that, when the body was discovered, the boy's face was blue, he had blood in his mouth, and excrement was smeared on his body. The crime was gruesome, pure evil.

The *New York Times* has yet to mention the story, however. The *Washington Post* printed only a small blurb from the AP. No one knows about it.

Compare that to the media coverage of the murder of Matthew Shepard, which occurred a year earlier: "It made the cover of *Time* magazine with the headline 'The War Over Gays,'" observes Brent Bozell of the Media Research Center, "with reporters predictably using the occasion to blame religious conservatives and call for hate-crime laws and other gay-left agenda items."

New Republic Senior Editor Andrew Sullivan found that, in the month after Shepard's murder, Nexis logged 3,007 stories about his death. In the month after Dirkhising's murder, Nexis recorded 46 stories about his. In all of last year, just one article about the Dirkhising case appeared in a major newspaper—the *Boston Globe*. The *New York Times* ignored the story completely, but published 45 stories about Shepard in the same period. "The discrepancy isn't just real," writes Sullivan. "It's staggering."

The reason, of course, is politics. In its early coverage, the AP even refused to describe the killers as gay.

"The Shepard case was hyped for political reasons: to build support for inclusion of homosexuals in a federal hate crimes law. The Dirkhising case was ignored for political reasons: squeamishness about reporting a story that could feed anti-gay prejudice, and the lack of any pending interest-group legislation to hang a story on," says Sullivan. "What we are seeing, I fear, is a logical consequence of the culture that hate-crimes rhetoric promotes. Some deaths—if they affect a politically protected class—are worth more than others. Other deaths, those that do not fit a politically correct profile, are left to oblivion."

The gay rights group Human Rights campaign, which has incessantly exploited the slaying of Matthew Shepard for both financial and political benefit, has not said one word about Jesse Dirkhising. In fact, despite some media queries, they consistently evade the issue.

To some, the Dirkhising murder portrays gays in a devastating light. Human Rights campaign believes it is in their interest to keep the Dirkhising case out of the public view. Of course, it plainly isn't. The notion that this murder somehow establishes a widespread correlation between homosexuality and homicidal tendencies is, to say the least, unfounded. Only the most militant and unreasonable of HRC's detractors would adopt that thesis. By refusing to denounce the crime, and to sympathize with the Dirkhising family—or to acknowledge Jesse Dirkhising in any way—HRC only bolsters the unreasonable claims. In their unwillingness to even discuss the case, HRC implies that the killing says something about American gays. Something bad.

But the murder only reflects on the two contemptible individuals who slaughtered a 13-year-old boy.

HRC itself isn't guilty of murder, of course, but it is

guilty of valuing lives instrumentally, according to political calculations. When the worth of a human life becomes a function of political convenience, one should naturally question his politics.

Yet this sort of thinking has become so endemic to our political culture, especially in "identity politics" (and therefore in academe), that it is difficult to escape. Identity politics subsumes individuals in a tribal unit, and defines them not according to the dictates of their conscience or mind, but according to the historical circumstances of the tribe, and its relationship to actual or would-be oppressors.

Elite institutions generally nourish the disposition. Sixty years after the promulgation of the Nuremberg laws, universities persist in cataloguing students according to race on college applications and official documents. And our cultural and political beliefs are said to be a function of our bloodlines. What a subversion of the liberation of mind promised by education.

When students are taught to see all of history through the lens of racial conflict, it's not surprising that they will adopt this view in their actual lives. Thus, campuses boil with racial tension, accusations of prejudice, and overt competition between "identity" groups, demanding parochial academic programs, resource centers, and so on for the benefit of their own kind, and from a limited pool of funds.

When students so ideologized venture into the class-race-gender warrior groups, like HRC, it's not surprising that it would take more than the fact of someone's being human to elicit their empathy. It is, however, depressing.

Most people will still voice a conviction in the inherent worth of human beings, irrespective of their physical attributes. But individuals, being individuals, tend not to be mobilized in activist groups, as are the identity warriors, to champion the individual as others champion the tribe.

That is a particular shame, for the idea of human worth is now under assault as never before. As Stella Baer writes in this issue, the influential intellectual movement of bioethics is now working to redefine life, death, and "person." Peter Singer, Princeton's Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics, remains the most prominent bioethicist because of such contentious works as "Killing Babies Isn't Always Wrong," an essay he published in the *London Spectator* in 1995. Singer also worries about "granting every member of our own species—psychopaths, infants, and the profoundly intellectually disabled included—a moral status superior to that of dogs, pigs, chimpanzees, and dolphins." Singer argues that "we have been too ready to assume a fundamental difference in kind between human beings and nonhuman animals."

In a recent essay defending, of all things, bestiality, he writes, "especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition—less so in the East—we have always seen ourselves as distinct from animals, and imagined that a wide, unbridgeable gulf separates us from them. Humans alone are made in the image of God. Only human beings have an immortal soul. In Genesis, God gives humans dominion over the animals. In the Renaissance idea of the Great Chain of Being, humans are halfway between the beasts and the angels. We are spiritual beings as well as physical beings. For Kant, humans have an inherent dignity that makes them ends in themselves, whereas animals are mere means to our ends. Today the language of human rights—rights that we attribute to all human beings but deny to all nonhuman animals—maintains this separation." It's all balderdash, he says. All these justifications are merely a mask for our prejudiced "desire to differentiate ourselves, erotically and in every other way, from animals," who are our moral equals.

Without any special value resting in being human, all that remains to establish the worth of people's lives are physical attributes, however arbitrary they are.

It may eventually appear that, after our obsessive assertions of difference are resolved, our common humanity will have disappeared.

And then where will we be?

