

The Empty Decade

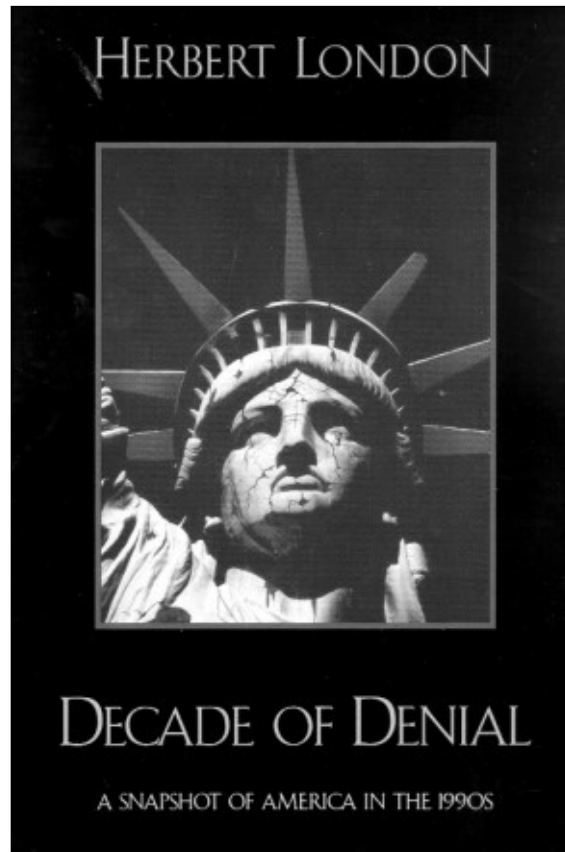
by Steven Menashi

After the defining event of the present decade, commentators rushed to pronounce judgment on the previous ten years. “This week’s nightmare, it’s now clear, has awakened us from a frivolous if not decadent decade-long dream,” wrote Frank Rich in the September 15 *New York Times*. “That fat, daydreaming America is gone now, way gone.” A parade of pundits proceeded to condemn the 1990s, which now appeared a thoroughly empty decade in contrast to the new age of moral seriousness.

Overlooked amidst the newly effusive moralism was a recent volume by Herbert London, *Decade of Denial: A Snapshot of America in the 1990s*. London, a professor of humanities at New York University and president of the Hudson Institute, had also diagnosed a moral drift in 1990s America—though he did so without the benefit of hindsight from the other side of September 11. London provides a panoramic view of ’90s culture, with a series of reflections that illustrate an increasingly fragmented and listless America.

He finds insights into ’90s values in the unlikelyst of places—from professional sports to the “Jenny Jones Show.” “There was a time when a player who hit a home run would trot quickly around the bases—head down—to avoid embarrassing the pitcher,” London writes. “Now, sluggers routinely stand at home plate and watch the ball soar into the stands.” The new behavior is not only symptomatic of a general decline in civility, though it is surely that. (As London reminds us, the Boston newspapers once excoriated Ted Williams for failing to doff his cap after hitting a home run.) It also reflects a fundamental change in the athletic code of conduct: “the team now comes after the individual,” explains London. Players no longer sacrifice themselves to move a runner into scoring position; for the most part, professional athletes concern themselves with their own celebrity and earning potential.

London contrasts the dignity of Jackie Robinson—who, though he never earned more than \$35,000 a year, never complained about his salary, and readily signed autographs for free—with the New York Mets’ Vince Coleman, who once caused facial and eye injuries to a two-year-old when he threw a firecracker at a group of baseball fans. “It is increasingly clear,” says London, “that a lot of spoiled kids with retarded emotional development have entered the game.” All of which appears trivial, of course. But baseball used to be a



Decade of Denial: A Snapshot of America in the 1990s

BY HERBERT I. LONDON
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unifying institution for American society, a source of the much-vaunted social capital so lacking in 1990s America. Now, probably because of narcissistic and ill-behaved athletes, its popularity is on the wane. “Sports are supposed to be about achievement,” London argues, “and a healthy society shows respect for the real meanings behind its rituals.”

The individualistic ethos pervaded the culture. The 1990s saw the explosion of television talk shows on which everyone has an opinion that needs to be expressed. “There was a time when ignorance was an impediment to discussion,” writes London. Now, self-expression is valued for its own sake. And not just on the “Jerry Springer Show”: Public life in the ’90s became dominated to an unprecedented degree by public opinion polls—a

reality London finds nowhere more evident than in the Clinton impeachment controversy, in which matters of law and principle lost out to the regnant desires of the public. How could any official “defy” the people’s will? Prominent politicians of yesteryear—such as, say, Eugene McCarthy—stood for principle, but in Clinton-era politics, opinion polls make right. London evokes a society that has lost its capacity for judgment, a society unable to distinguish between legitimate and wrong opinions, or between wisdom and foolishness.

American politics, too, took on a narcissistic quality in the ’90s. “Political leaders replaced the politics of production—of results—with a politics of feelings,” explains London. “We went from ‘Ask what you can do for your country’ to ‘I feel your pain.’” The prevailing spirit was one of “moral freedom,” a term coined by sociologist Alan Wolfe in a book of the same name. Moral freedom, Wolfe explained, “means that individu-

accomplishment and promoting egalitarianism and self-esteem. It’s emblematic that American schools now institute “no-cut” policies for sports teams, in order to save students the humiliation of not qualifying for the team. The Plainfield Community Middle School in Indiana, for example, has 72 girls on its cheerleading squad—with “a definite sacrifice in synchronization.”

The leveling impulse continued its march through the university. Poststructuralist academics teach that no text is superior to any other, rooted as they are in particular—and morally equal—cultures. The result is that many of the West’s important works are no longer read, and those that are taught are deconstructed to reveal hidden meanings of race, class, and gender oppression. And the democratized university no longer requires specific courses of its students, allowing students to choose among course offerings according to their particular preferences. The result is that the general

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als should determine for themselves what it means to lead a good and virtuous life.” In such a moral universe, claims of civic duty lack authority and the state lacks a unifying mission. Thus, in the 1990s, politics receded, except where it could bolster personal gratification. Government became a sort of sideshow to the engines of commerce and economic growth.

The school system, London argues, was also caught up in issues of personal comfort, at the expense of educational fundamentals. Increasingly, educators came to believe that the schools should address the various social pathologies that the larger society seemed unable to remedy. Schools displaced traditional curricula with programs about AIDS, illegitimacy, drunk driving, and other causes. School administrators substituted psychobehavioral goals for academic objectives. The outcome of therapeutic schooling, of course, is that American students lag behind their European and Japanese counterparts in measures of educational achievement, but far surpass them in self-esteem.

What’s needed is a renewed emphasis on educational achievement. But American schools persist in deriding

knowledge once associated with a college degree has disappeared, and students are more ignorant than ever. That ignorance has social consequences. “A culture divorced from its common bonds does not have the amalgam to cohere,” London writes. “When students are unaware of common cultural cues, when the voices of deep human understanding, such as Shakespeare, are ignored, when the achievements of Western civilization are derided and subsequently subordinated to the study of other civilizations, then the die for cultural dissolution is cast.”

Indeed, it’s now a cliché that the 1990s witnessed a dramatic corrosion of American civil society. Political scientist Robert Putnam identified the decline of social capital, as Americans cease to participate in community and civic organizations. Whereas Americans once bowled in leagues, they are now bowling alone. The sociologist Daniel Bell argues that the United States is losing *civitas*, “the spontaneous willingness to obey the law, to respect the rights of others, to forgo enrichment at the expense of the public weal.” And Americans themselves have identified the same trend. In 1999, two-thirds of Americans reported that American civic life has weakened

in recent years and that society elevates the individual at the expense of community.

London depicts a society in which bonds of civility have eroded and a cult of self-gratification compromises public life. But he does little to identify the causes of social decay, except to point to the social upheaval of the 1960s. It is true that those who came of age in the 1960s and '70s came to govern American society in the 1990s. But that doesn't explain the singular moral drift of the 1990s, compared to the decades on either side. The 1990s were anomalous in that the United States had no enemy—indeed, the 1990s were shaped by the belief that all fundamental conflicts had ended. America in the 1980s saw itself in contrast to Soviet communism, just as 21st century America now contends with Taliban-style Islamic fundamentalism. America in the 1990s lived through no such clarifying experience.

that serving the country has become more important to them since September 11. Being American now seems a not trivial distinction. Large majorities expect American businesses to contribute to the war on terrorism and the spirit of patriotism. Even Hollywood leaders, in a display of civic responsibility unseen since World War II, met with White House officials to decide what their industry can do to lift public spirits and foster understanding of American values.

It's too soon to declare the advent of a new and virtuous society, but it is clear that certain features of the empty decade are incompatible with new social realities. Academic multiculturalism, for one, has been exposed as thoroughly bankrupt. The country would be aided in its current effort, certainly, if its students were familiar with other cultures, conversant in Arab history, and knowledgeable about Islamic law. But in fact they know very little of substance about other cultures, and as the

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In the relatively peaceful and demobilized 1990s, however, Americans could easily evade troublesome moral judgments and retreat into comfortable, private universes. In such a depoliticized state, the satisfaction of material desires seems much more important than national politics. Political life in this environment, such as it is, becomes an adjunct to commercial life. Clinton-era politics was about private comforts—family and medical leave, a patients’ Bill of Rights, targeted tax cuts for school tuition—rather than broad national interests.

In the changed world of 2002, it seems, politics animates all spheres of life. Two-thirds of Americans tell pollsters

FBI’s post-September 11 pleas for Arabic and Pashto translators made clear, they’re not learning non-Western languages, either. It is now evident that multiculturalism was never about understanding non-Western cultures; it was about denigrating Western culture in order to promote self-esteem among “marginalized” groups. The lazy cultural relativism endemic to academe also appears discredited after Americans have encountered true, undeniable evil. As we rediscover our shared civic life in the wake of national tragedy, perhaps Americans will come to share London’s idealism—and rebuild our weakened common culture. ☞