

**ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**  
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**PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE**

***THE “CALIFORNIAZATION” OF AMERICA***

One of my greatest concerns about the current leadership in Washington and in many of the states of this union is the stunning absence of wisdom among our leaders. Over the last few months, one of the arguments I have posited on *Issues* is that if you wish to see where America as a nation will be in ten years, look at California. Indeed, columnist David Ignatius laments that within the US there is a “growing tendency of our political system to make promises in social spending programs that it isn’t prepared to pay for with tax increases.” Let’s think together about this trend.

- First, consider the situation in California. The state economy there is recovering to some degree but political dysfunction is rampant. In California, despite some serious bipartisan efforts, no decisions have been made to place the state on a sound financial footing. Ignatius comments that “the political forces that generate deficits are just too strong: a Democratic Party in hock to public-employee unions and a Republican Party in love with tax cuts.” Most states are in a similar situation. They are beginning to recover from the recession but overall they suffer from a chronic inability to resist the impulse to spend big and tax small. That same penchant is obvious in our nation’s capital: Democrats get elected by delivering massive entitlement programs that bind people to the state and Republicans get elected promising to cut taxes. The test case for the Californization of America is now health-care legislation. Democrats want to provide universal access to health care but have no real plan to pay for it. Had Scott Brown not been elected to the Senate from Massachusetts, the Party would be celebrating one of their entitlement victories that could lead to the bankruptcy of America. We remain bound to the dysfunctional nature of American politics—promise significant entitlement programs (e.g., health care) but do not take seriously the obligation to pay for it. The CBO just released a report that the deficit of the US this fiscal year (it ends 30 September 2010) will be \$1.35 trillion, just slightly lower than last year’s deficit. That is a shocking number and yet the Congress and the White House are not taking this seriously. A 2011 freeze on spending for 17% of the national government as the president proposed in his State of the Union is hardly fiscal discipline! In addition, it is imperative to remember that the future liabilities of the US government for its entitlement programs (government pensions, Medicare, Social Security, Medicaid, etc.) now total over \$53 trillion!! Where is the wisdom in governing to try and add a universal health care access program funded all or in part by the US government? California is the laboratory for liberalism in the US and it is spiraling downward at an accelerating rate, all driven by a huge budget deficit. Can the United States government be far behind?

- Second, why is California’s liberalism so lethal? Here is the situation: California has a 12.3% unemployment rate and a budget \$20 billion in the red. Productive Californians are leaving for states with less-punishing regulatory and tax regimes. But as Steven Greenhut, director of the Pacific Research Institute’s journalism center, has argued, “so far there isn’t broad consensus to do much about those who have prodded the state into its current position: public employee unions that drive up costs and fight to block spending cuts.” At some point, California will need to take on its public employee unions. Here is why: Approximately 85% of the state’s 235,000 employees (not including higher education employees) are unionized. As governor Schwarzenegger has noted, over the past decade pension costs for public employees have increased 2,000%. State revenues increased only 24% over the same period. There are now more than 15,000 government retirees statewide who receive pensions that exceed \$100,000 a year. The pensions for these (and other retirees) increase each year with inflation and are guaranteed by taxpayers forever—regardless of what happens in the economy or whether the state’s pension funds have been fully funded. As Greenhut reports, a 2008 California commission pegged California’s unfunded pension liability at \$63.5 billion, which will be amortized over several decades. Such entitlements are strangling the California economy, its state government and its citizens. Similar entitlement obligations are and will continue to have the same effect on the national government, its economy and its citizens. We are making promises on social spending (i.e., all entitlement programs) without increasing taxes, seeking other sources of revenue or considering seriously how we will pay for these programs. This is the future of America. And amazingly, the Congress and the White House are still promoting universal, health-care access legislation.

See Greenhut’s essay in the *Wall Street Journal* (23-24 December 2009); George Will in the *Washington Post* (10 January 2010); David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (3 January 2010); and “Breakpoint” (20 January 2010).

## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

### *FURTHER EVIDENCE OF CULTURAL DYSFUNCTION*

That the broader American culture is in a state of dysfunction is a given. In this *Perspective*, I seek to cite several examples of this dysfunction. I do so, not to promote despair but as evidence that the fundamental challenge facing America is not political, economic or social—it is spiritual.

- First, consider the matter of character in leadership. James Davison Hunter recently wrote that: “We want character but without conviction; we want strong morality but without the emotional burden of guilt or shame; we want virtue but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist upon it; we want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on terms that we want it” (James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character*, p. xv). The Bible also declares that in terms of church leadership, leaders are to be “above reproach” and that it is important to observe them and see if they manage their household well and their resources well. Those requirements

apply to church leadership but common sense would dictate that we apply these thoughts more generally for all leaders in our culture. Consider the case of John Edwards. He was in the Senate for six years and had previously made a fortune as a trial lawyer—and then found himself the vice presidential candidate with John Kerry in 2004. His smile, his energy, his passion were all contagious. He, along with his diligent wife, Elizabeth, was a political leader with promise. Now all that promise is in ashes. John Edwards had a major character flaw. The sex scandal that has consumed him stemmed from his inability to exercise wisdom, discernment and self control. Finally, he has admitted that he sired a child to his mistress during the VP campaign and, incidentally, also while his wife was struggling with breast cancer. Imagine – he could have been our vice president or even our president! As columnist Richard Cohen has commented, when it comes to potential leaders, “time matters.” We need time to observe someone, how they react to crisis situations, how they deal with family issues and how they manage themselves in terms of self control and discipline. For that reason, I am concerned about the meteoric rise of Sarah Palin. Or consider the new senator-elect Scott Brown. Incredibly, hours after his election, some Republicans were saying he might make a good president!!! Finally, even consider our president, Barack Obama. Only six years ago, he was in the Illinois state legislature as a rookie. Now, he is president! I know of nothing nefarious or unethical about his character, but he does demonstrate how quickly gifted speakers can become “rock stars” and presidents. We have lost much in our culture about valuing seasoned, tested leadership. The Bible cautions us to test our leaders in the church. Perhaps that counsel should be wisely applied across the culture. See Richard Cohen in the *Washington Post* (26 January 2010).

- Second, American culture is giving every evidence of being a culture in love with exhibitionism. Let me explain. The Internet, Twitter, Facebook, reality television, etc., all indicate that American culture loves exhibitionism. Recently, columnist Michael Gerson cited several bizarre but revealing examples: “In 1996, Jennifer Ringley began broadcasting her entire life—from brushing her teeth to making love—on the Internet. In 1998, Elizabeth Ann Oliver delivered her baby live on the Web. In 2001, Joel Harris presented his breakup with his girlfriend and his nervous breakdown for Internet consumption.” Through Facebook and Twitter, we find Americans filling their sites with random thoughts on everything and making revelations once reserved only for the most intimate of friends. As Gerson writes, “transparency has become disconnected from intimacy.” Details of a couple’s love life appear; the drunken excesses of a Saturday night binge are detailed; and even the death of a loved one appears on Facebook, with messages from “friends” who are in all actuality strangers. Gerson makes an extremely valid and poignant point: “I suspect, however, that some Internet exhibitionists are simply lonely. They want the details of their lives—no matter how trivial, troubling or shocking—to matter and count to someone. . . . But if loneliness is the motive, it is not likely to be relieved before a computer screen. The Internet is a one-man show.” All of this raises an important legal question. Suppose that you Twitter, email or use Facebook on your employer’s computer or cellphone? If one uses such equipment that you do not own but your employer does, who then actually owns that email, text message or Facebook update? The person who composes it? The owner of the instrument that was used? Is there really a constitutional right to “sext” your mistress from your employer’s cellphone? The point is that the culture wants privacy in an age of exhibitionism. How can both be preserved if you are using equipment you do not own? We have never faced such questions before as a culture. Can a culture of exhibitionists demand

privacy? What are the limits? Where are the guidelines in such situations? Exhibitionism produces shallowness and superficiality in human relationships—and raises profound legal questions. See Gerson's essay in the *Washington Post* (15 January 2010).

- Third, the pregnancy rate among teenage girls in the US has jumped for the first time in more than a decade. Indeed, the pregnancy rate among 15- to 19-year-olds increased 3% between 2005 and 2006—the first jump since 1990. In addition, the abortion rate also inched up for the first time in more than a decade—rising 1%. The teen pregnancy rate has become a hot political issue as well, for the federal government has gotten involved in funding sex education programs. Should such programs focus on encouraging abstinence until marriage or on birth control? What is most interesting about this debate is that the Obama administration eliminated more than \$150 million in funds for groups that promote abstinence-based sex-education. Those who support abstinence programs contend that these recent findings provide powerful evidence of the need to continue to encourage delayed sexual activity, not only to avoid pregnancy but also to reduce the risk of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Valerie Huber of the National Abstinence Education Association suggests that “Research unmistakably indicates that delaying sexual initiation rates and reducing the total number of lifetime partners is more valuable in protecting sexual health of young people than simply passing out condoms.” She adds that contributors to the increase in teen pregnancies “include an over-sexualized culture, lack of involved and positive role models, and the dominant message that teen sex is expected and without consequences.” Historically, the rate at which US teens were having sex rose steadily through the 1970s and 1980s, fueling a sharp rise in teen pregnancies and births. In 1991 the trend reversed because of the threat of AIDS and changing mores about sex and other factors, including the greater use of contraceptives. The recent rate increase (cited from research done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics) was highest for blacks. Among blacks, the rate increased from 122.7 per 1,000 women in 2005 to 126.3. For Hispanics, the rate rose from 124.9 per 1,000 women to 126.6. Among whites, the rate increased from 43.3 per 1,000 women to 44.0. All of this indicates a simple proposition: When a culture does not honor, encourage and facilitate the sexual ethic presented in Scripture, there will be consequences. This is neither a flippant remark nor one that ignores compassion. Romans 1:18-32 details a pattern for us. God has revealed His truth clearly and forthrightly, with the result that no human will ever be “without excuse” (v. 20) when it comes to understanding His truth. When humans ignore His clearly revealed truth, God “gives them over” (vv. 24, 26, 28) to behaviors that are ultimately self-destructive in their nature. God has made His world with established ethical standards. If humans follow those common grace standards, His common grace blessings will follow. If humans choose to ignore His common grace standards, there will be obvious, clear consequences. As our dysfunctional culture ignores God's clearly established boundaries for sexual activity, there will be tragic consequences. For that reason there are sexually transmitted diseases and there are teen pregnancies. It is the teens and the children that are then born of such pregnancies who will suffer. This is the tragedy of these statistics. Congress cannot pass laws that will change this. Social workers cannot simply pass out condoms and expect behavior to change. There needs to be a fundamental change of the human heart that sees things the way God sees them. Our only hope is families and our culture saturated with God's Word and His standards. The heart of our dysfunctional culture's problem is spiritual! See Rob Stein in the *Washington Post* (26 January 2010).