

Incorrigible

Bringing social hope and political rhetoric into instructive contact with what it means to be human

JUST how incorrigible is human nature, and what lessons on public policy follow once we come to terms with the sobering answer to this age-old question?

On one level, both from personal experience and from numerous studies, we know that it is extraordinarily difficult to change habits, personality traits, culture, and social institutions. Take weight control. Ninety-five percent of the many millions of Americans who diet each year in pursuit of a more attractive and healthier figure regain within one to three years almost all of the pounds they previously shed. Even when faced with certain death our bodies often seem unable to follow our minds. Many men who have had heart attacks continue to smoke, though they have been warned that they are significantly increasing the likelihood of a second (and most likely fatal) attack.

Studies demonstrate that numerous drug-rehabilitation, crime-prevention, and job-training programs for welfare clients yield results no better than the new boot camps yield for young offenders. But just as dieters disregard their own and others' experiences, the very strong propensity of all these programs to fail has not stopped Congress from making them a cornerstone of its anti-crime policy.

We all know how difficult changing human behavior is, but this knowledge has not changed our basic optimistic predisposition. Once we truly accept that human nature is surprisingly resistant to improvement, however, some rather positive, constructive lessons follow.

Lower your expectations. When seeking change, expect it to

cost many times as much as you first imagined and require much more time. When viewed through this lens, a 50 percent graduation rate from boot camps—which those opposed to the camps see as a failure—is not a reason to close them but a stunning success.

(The boot camps are doing better than many public schools and almost as well as some colleges.) We must acknowledge that hoping to assimilate people raised for twenty years in one subculture (say, the inner city, as a gang member) into a different subculture (of work and social responsibility) in only a few months is laughably ambitious. And we must not expect that helping disadvantaged children catch up academically by means of a program like Head Start will keep them on the straight and narrow when they graduate from the program. This expectation is especially absurd if we return them to a world—rife with prejudice and economic and social disadvantages—that agitates against hard work and progress by legitimate means. Growing evidence shows that kids may need long-term and costly "maintenance" programs. A Loyola University study, for instance, found that children who participated in a special program run by the Chicago public schools from age three until the end of third grade tested at or above national averages on completion but that a decade later many of these gains had melted away. The researcher, J. S. Fuerst, now believes that disadvantaged youngsters may need up to *nine years* of supplemented education. He may well be underestimating what they actually require.

A firm grasp of our stubborn, improvement-resistant nature will keep our future policymakers—one hopes against hope—from being swayed by social-policy entrepreneurs. Take the reports on America Works, a for-profit

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corporation that trains welfare clients for *one week* and then finds them steady jobs. The company has recently become the darling of New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's administration, because it fits the new mayor's ideology (greater reliance on the private sector) and because the city hopes it can place many of its 1.1 million welfare clients in jobs this way and slash welfare expenditures. In New York, America Works has so far placed only about 1,100 people; the initial reports of its incredible successes were based on 290 cases. You can bet your next year's salary (I herewith offer mine) that most welfare clients will not be put to work after one week of training. Only blurry-eyed optimists will believe that such a program can work on a large scale.

Creaming is okay. America Works does provide a valuable lesson: because it is paid much of its fee only after a welfare client has been on the job for four months, it prefers to work with clients who are easy to place—those most disposed to work and most able to do so—and drops from its program those who show signs of presenting a difficulty. Anyone who shows up five minutes late for a training session is out, for example. Critics call such an approach “creaming,” and consider it a serious defect.

This criticism presupposes that there are other methods of converting an entire barrel of milk into cheese—or, to put it less metaphorically, that an organization can help all or most welfare clients to find jobs without making an immense per-client effort.

But if we start with a more realistic notion of human transformation—which acknowledges that it is typically very costly and challenging, and that the deeper we reach into the barrel, the greater the difficulties we'll have—creaming suddenly stops being a mark of defective policymaking and becomes a wise policy to try to implement. Taking on the relatively easy cases first gives us much more bang for whatever bucks we can spend on a given endeavor than taking a random sample of all potential clients. The resources saved this way can then be applied to some of the more difficult cases. Policymakers should, though, recognize the fact that the going will get tougher and tougher.

Don't expect to scrape the bottom of the barrel. More difficult to come to terms with is that even if we dedicate considerable resources and persevere for years, we will still have at least some nontrivial “residue”: people who cannot be reached. Just as there are some patients too ill to cure, there are some welfare clients who cannot be weaned and some criminals who cannot be rehabilitated. How to deal with them is a major civil-rights issue. For example, the State of Washington has passed a law that requires prisons to release violent sex offenders not immediately after they have completed their sentence but only after a judge or a jury has determined that they no longer pose a danger. Such indeterminate sentences don't become defensible until we accept that not only are most people rather difficult to change but some people are incorrigible—at least given the current state of medical and social-science knowledge.

Don't allow the best to defeat the good. Both the social-sci-

ence literature and the daily press are full of reports about this or that government program that turned out to be a disaster. The common practice is to compare the program as it has turned out with what it was originally envisioned as. Instead we should take it for granted that, given our nature, very few if any programs will work out swimmingly. The best basis for comparison is not the dreams of the founder, or even the blueprint, but something else that works. It will not do merely to establish that phonics does not work when it comes to teaching kids to read—tell me what works better. It will not do simply to criticize training programs for welfare mothers—show me something else that helps them find jobs. As long as the social goal at hand must be served, we must settle for the comparative best (which is often not so hot), rather than chase elusive perfection.

Be multi-faceted but not holistic. An official at the U.S. Department of Education has reported that the department is considering running an experimental program based on the hypothesis that whatever role modeling, encouragement, and assistance young students obtain in school is negated by life in drug-infested and poverty-stricken areas, by broken homes, by an environment of unemployment and asocial behavior. The goal is to discover whether granting these youngsters “everything”—providing their parents with jobs and housing, trying to change the neighborhood's culture, arranging for after-school tutoring, and so forth—will help them catch up with students from privileged areas and stay caught up.

On the one hand, the logic of such an approach is inescapable. The social world is one messy ball of wax; we can hardly hope to intervene in one strand of a person's life (say, schoolwork) and ignore all the others. This logic has led James Q. Wilson and other scholars to suggest that inner-city children should be taken from their troubled parents and put into kibbutzlike boarding schools.

On the other hand, the costs of such a holistic approach are so overwhelming that even if it works, it is impractical for the large number of people who need help. We must therefore search for approaches that acknowledge the ball-of-wax nature of many of our problems but are less exacting than the holistic approaches. This is the reason that prenatal care and vaccinations are so attractive as programs. These services can be provided if some attention is paid to other factors (treatment may need to be brought to mothers rather than requiring mothers to come to clinics), but it's not necessary to provide housing, full employment, and years of supplemented education just so that the programs will work (although these may be desirable in their own right).

It's no use pretending that poverty or welfare will be abolished, AIDS or cancer cured in this century, drug abuse or teen pregnancy sharply reduced. Let's instead dedicate our efforts to effective but clearly delineated projects in each of these areas. This humbler approach is likely to have a very attractive side effect: it may enhance public willingness to pay for such projects and may also restore public trust in our leaders and institutions. ☼