

OPINION AND COMMENTARY

The President and American ethics

By Amital Etzioni

The president elected this year could put shoring up America's ethic in a high place on the nation's agenda. He could do this by including in his inaugural address and first State of the Union message not only proposals on economic, social, and foreign policy matters but suggestions for curbing unethical behavior — and encouraging ethical conduct — both in government and in society at large.

Which specific measures should be advanced is a subject for lengthy consideration, but the basic approach can be illustrated quickly.

First, laws which are not enforced should either be enforced or removed from the books. Unenforced laws are a social poison not just because the matter they seek to regulate is left unregulated, but because they undermine the credibility of the civic order which spills over into those matters not directly expressed in law, the ethical code.

It is senseless, for instance, to make millions of Americans who consume marijuana into law-breakers, or to allow people to use marijuana but penalize those who sell it. Even traffic laws, such as the 55 m.p.h. speed limit, should either be more systematically enforced or modified (e.g., by raising the speed limit). Otherwise, the wide violation of the law serves as a kind of school for unethical conduct, and the lessons so learned do in turn gradually transfer from one area of conduct to others.

Second, penalties exacted for the same violation in different parts of the country or by different judges must be equalized, at least be less unequal. People tend to "behave" when they feel the system of sanctions is fundamentally fair; they tend to rebel when they sense it to be arbitrary.

Study after study has shown that different

judges in the same court, and different courts across the nation, mete out *radically* different sentences to persons who have committed the same offense. Less leeway to judges through legislation requiring standardized sentences may help restore a sense of fair play.

Third, the intrusion of special interest, which bends public life to a privileged few, must be curbed. Various bills to limit the opportunities for illegitimate political influence have been suggested on the state and federal levels, but few have been enacted and even fewer are enforced.

Next, the president might challenge Congress to a higher level of ethical conduct. If Congress were put sufficiently in the limelight it might act more vigorously against members who abuse their offices. The context could be set by requiring disclosure of all private interests and sources of income, and by prohibiting any income from outside sources.

Next to the president, members of Congress are the most important source of leadership on issues involving civic morality. If they were to set a better example, state legislators and city council members might follow suit, along with "front-line" public servants such as policemen, building inspectors, medicaid auditors, followed by the professions, the corporations, and the public at large.

Corporations could be required to disclose more of their activities, to adhere to a new, more explicitly stated code of ethics, and as Sen. Frank Church has suggested, to open up their records to outside audit committees, or include on their boards of directors one or more publicly appointed members. Also as Ralph Nader has suggested, the lax local corporation charters might be replaced by more stringent federal ones.

Nor need the president limit his leadership to acting as a model of moral leadership, setting the nation's agenda, and putting forward draft legislation. A White House conference of educators should be convened to work on ways moral education in schools can be furthered.

The schools are pivotal for several reasons: first, because to the extent to which we are witnessing widespread breakup of the American family or its defection from the duty of developing the moral character of children, the schools, as the main alternate source of guidance, gain in importance. Also, they are more subject to influence via public policy and more accountable to the community than are the myriad families.

These steps, and others like them, will in and of themselves not build an ethical community; but they may serve to set a new tone, a new mood, in which individuals, parents, educators, citizens, will be more willing and more able to do their restorative work.

Recently President Ford suggested the time has arrived to put Watergate behind us, to stop torturing ourselves with ever more revelations of abuses and scandals. While such a healing is needed, if it is attempted before significant reforms are carried out in the work of public institutions and public attitudes, the result will be to suppress from consciousness the spread of unethical conduct and allow it again to grow out of sight until one day, in the not-too-remote future, unethical conduct seems prevalent — a condition far from unknown in earlier historical periods or on other continents, but one Americans have long fought to avoid.

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