

WINNING THE CULTURAL WAR BY CHANGING THE BATTLEGROUND

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CEASE-FIRE ON THE FAMILY, *The End of the Culture War*, Douglas Kmiec,** Crisis Books, 1995. Pp. 151. \$13.95.

In his controversial Republican National Convention speech in the summer of 1992, Pat Buchanan appealed to a sense of urgency saying, "There is a religious war going on. . . . We must take back our cities, and take back our culture, and take back our country!" His was a call to arms in the midst of a cultural war. The time had come, he urged, to win the battle against abortion, gay rights, and kiddy porn. And who could deny the threats to culture—Christian culture, in particular—being waged by the evil forces of secularism? There's a war going on out there. It is both a nation-dividing civil war, and a war of values of the most uncivil kind.

One need only watch television to be reminded that once-homogenous values are being trashed by the talk-show, MTV mentality pervading society. And one need only look at the latest headline to see that, in case after case, our nation's courts are ratifying society's descent into the moral abyss. What, then, shall we do? What role should we play in the battle, either as individuals or as the church? Is ours the duty of becoming political activists? Should we join forces with Operation Rescue or picket the adults-only theater, or write our representatives in Congress in protest over homosexual-friendly legislation?

Parents of young children, especially, feel overwhelmed, as if there is nothing that can hold back the assault against the family. "How can any one couple make a difference?" they ask.

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Who can be expected to tilt against the windmills of evil forces so formidable that not even democratically-decided state-wide referenda can be relied on for protection? Could even a Constitutional Amendment turn the tide in favor of the besieged American family?

In his scholarly and thoughtful analysis of our age, Professor Douglas Kmiec offers a perhaps-surprising alternative to the national angst over the culture war. Kmiec's thesis is that the best and only truly lasting way to win the culture war is to fight it on a different battlefield—at the family level, where the chances of success are greatest and the potential for long-term impact on culture at large is best exploited.

As a distinguished constitutional scholar, Kmiec is uniquely qualified to remind us that engaging the enemy in a secularist public arena is playing a fool's game. Outlining the limited function of law and politics, he thoroughly and completely annihilates the notion of political salvationism—the idea that political activism alone can preserve the values which keep society from disintegrating. While not disputing that law can reflect—even affect—morality, he nevertheless insists that, “Neither law nor politics is up to the task of moral formation.”

The most obvious barrier to a governmental solution is that political rhetoric is dominated by talk of rights, whether “rights to life,” “rights to choice,” or even “rights to worship.” It is, says Kmiec, “the rhetoric of antagonism, not understanding. It is rhetoric designed to allure persons into selfishly ‘empowering’ themselves as individuals . . . not into ennobling themselves with a sense of duty to family or community.”

For all the twisted rhetoric of Minister Louis Farrakhan, his appeal to the Million Man March was a kind of spiritual alchemy in which the dross of racism and Islamic verse was transformed, despite himself, into a golden truth about the core problem of social decay and its ultimate solution. At base, the problem is spiritual, not political. The solution, likewise, is not about commitment to political ideology or to a particular political party, but to personal responsibility, family, and community.

In fact, countering society's moral drift will require a reversal of conventional wisdom—turning on end; an upside-down ordering of social function. Says Kmiec, “the most accurate view of life is gained from bottom-up, not top-down. It relies upon the concept of *subsidiarity*, which holds that authority ought never be arrogated to a higher level where it can be successfully exercised below.”

How can so radical a reversal be implemented? It will require a kind of moral federalism which recognizes the family, together with "the assisting smaller sovereigns of church, school, and workplace," as the crucial centers of learning through which the basic virtues are taught. If government is the least efficient—and increasingly least likely—source of moral education, the focus must be placed, as Dr. James Dobson has insisted, on the family.

Although Kmiec includes the school within his list of "smaller sovereigns" contributing to the inculcation of basic virtues, he is openly cynical about just how far the public school—divorced from any meaningful moral foundation—can lead toward a moral renaissance. Not even school prayer—a symbolic token in the larger cultural struggle—is the answer, says Kmiec. "It is too late in the day to pretend that the public schools can return to some pre-1960's form of homogenized, Protestant moral instruction that may have then infused the school system." Would such a return even be desirable? Kmiec thinks today's multi-denominational instruction is "like trying to mix chili and ice cream—it produces distasteful intellectual and spiritual hash."

Kmiec hints that the answer to the public school system is "allowing parents to choose freely the school that their children will attend," undoubtedly a reference to some form of a voucher system. Left largely unexplored, however, is the question of what should be done for children who, under such a system, nevertheless would remain relegated to guard-gated, metal-detected, inner-city public schools. Would not even a slight nod toward a religion-free, *Book of Virtues*-type approach, be better than nothing at all? Is not even a bland nondenominational prayer to be preferred over no reference to deity at all, especially for children whose upbringing is neither family oriented nor spiritual? If the family is the ideal fount of moral wisdom, what role should the public school play for children who have no traditional nuclear family?

For the intact, spiritually-directed family, Kmiec offers invaluable practical insight into the process of teaching virtue within the home environment. This is done primarily through his "Family Prescriptions" which are sprinkled throughout the book. "Assert family sovereignty," comes Kmiec's first advice. "All families are not alike." Only the family that affirms the megavirtues of belief in God and knowable truth will be in a position to mediate against adverse cultural influences.

"The school chosen for a child must be a genuine extension of the family," comes the next prescription. Extending that still further, "The school chosen by the family should share the

family's religious faith." How else will the family's efforts toward virtue avoid being at crosscurrents with the formal education process?

More practical yet, come these prescriptions: "Elevate the family over money and power' systems;" "Spend the time;" and don't forget that "families need a sense of place and community." One readily senses that Kmiec's practical advice comes not from the mind of a scholar, but from the heart of a loving, committed parent. It is obvious that, together with his wife, Kmiec himself has chosen well in matters of money and power; that the Kmiec family's time is spent wisely; and that the children have benefited greatly from being given a sense of place and community. It is not simply in the telling, but in the experienced living of the message, that this book rings so true.

Like a concert for soldiers in the midst of war, Kmiec's book soothes the battle-weary soul. But just when one thinks that the baton has dropped for the last time and the concert is over, there is a surprise encore every bit as exciting as the main program. The concluding chapter presents a number of stirring essays on the American family, drawn principally from Kmiec's earlier contributions to the editorial pages of the *Chicago Tribune*, *Wall Street Journal*, and other leading newspapers, as well as from his popular radio series entitled "The American Family Perspective." The last chapter alone is worth the price of admission.

One has come to expect thoughtful writing from Professor Kmiec. The serendipity of *Cease-Fire on the Family* is that he just may have provided a strategy for winning the culture war without firing a shot. Suppose there was a war, but nobody came. Suppose that the American family was so successful in the task of inculcating values that any thought of a culture war in the next generation was simply overwhelmed by embarrassingly excessive virtue on every side.