

Noonan: America's Crisis of Character

The nation seems to be on the wrong track, and not just economically.

By PEGGY NOONAN



People in politics talk about the right track/wrong track numbers as an indicator of public mood. This week Gallup had a poll showing only 24% of Americans feel we're on the right track as a nation. That's a historic low. Political professionals tend, understandably, to think it's all about the economy—unemployment, foreclosures, we're going in the wrong direction. I've long thought that public dissatisfaction is about more than the economy, that it's also about our culture, or rather the flat, brute, highly sexualized thing we call our culture.

Now I'd go a step beyond that. I think more and more people are worried about the American *character*—who we are and what kind of adults we are raising.

Every story that has broken through the past few weeks has been about who we are as a people. And they are all disturbing.

A tourist is beaten in Baltimore. Young people surround him and laugh. He's pummeled, stripped and robbed. No one helps. They're too busy taping it on their smartphones. That's how we heard their laughter. The video is on YouTube along with the latest McDonald's beat-down and the latest store surveillance tapes of flash mobs. Groups of teenagers swarm into stores, rob everything they can, and run out. The phenomenon is on the rise across the country. Police now have a nickname for it: "flash robs."

That's just the young, you say. Juvenile delinquency is as old as history.

Let's turn to adults.

Also starring on YouTube this week was the sobbing woman. She's the poor traveler who began to cry great heaving sobs when a Transportation Security Administration agent at the Madison, Wis., airport either patted her down or felt her up, depending on your viewpoint and experience. Jim Hoft of TheGatewayPundit.com recorded it, and like all the rest of the videos it hurts to watch. When the TSA agent—an adult, a middle aged woman—was done, she just walked away, leaving the passenger alone and uncomforted, like a tourist in Baltimore.

There is the General Services Administration scandal. An agency devoted to efficiency is outed as an agency of mindless bread-and-circuses indulgence. They had a four-day regional conference in Las Vegas, with clowns and mind readers.

The reason the story is news, and actually upsetting, is not that a government agency wasted money. That is not news. The reason it's news is that the people involved thought what they were doing was funny, and appropriate. In the past, bureaucratic misuse of taxpayer money was quiet. You needed investigators to find it, trace it, expose it. Now it's a big public joke. They held an awards show. They sang songs about the perks of a government job: "Brand new computer and underground parking and a corner office. . . . Love to the taxpayer. . . . I'll never be under OIG investigation." At the show, the singer was made Commissioner for a Day. "The hotel would like to talk to you about paying for the party that was held in the commissioner's suite last night" the emcee said. It got a big laugh.

On the "red carpet" leading into the event, GSA chief Jeffrey Neely said: "I am wearing an Armani." One worker said, "I have a talent for drinking Margarita. . . . It all began with the introduction of performance measures." That got a big laugh too.

All the workers looked affluent, satisfied. Only a generation ago, earnest, tidy government bureaucrats were spoofed as drudges and drones. Not anymore. Now they're way cool. Immature, selfish and vain, but way cool.

Their leaders didn't even pretend to have a sense of mission and responsibility. They reminded me of the story a year ago of the dizzy captain of a U.S. Navy ship who made off-color videos and played them for his crew. He wasn't interested in the burdens of leadership—the need to be the adult, the uncool one, the one who maintains standards. No one at GSA seemed interested in playing the part of the grown-up, either.

Why? Why did they think this is OK? They seemed mildly decadent. Or proudly decadent. In contrast to you, low, toiling taxpayer that you are, poor drudges and drones.

There is the Secret Service scandal. That one broke through too, and you know the facts: overseas to guard the president, sent home for drinking, partying, picking up prostitutes.

What's terrible about this story is that for anyone who's ever seen the Secret Service up close it's impossible to believe. The Secret Service are the best of the best. That has been their reputation because that has been their reality. They have always been tough, disciplined and mature. They are men, and they have the most extraordinary job: take the bullet.

Remember when Reagan was shot? That was Secret Service agent Tim McCarthy who stood there like a stone wall, and took one right in the gut. Jerry Parr pushed Reagan into the car, and Mr. Parr was one steely-eyed agent. Reagan coughed up a little blood, and Mr. Parr immediately saw its color was a little too dark. He

barked the order to change direction and get to the hospital, not the White House, and saved Reagan's life. From Robert Caro's "Passage of Power," on Secret Service agent Rufus Youngblood, Nov. 22, 1963: "there was a sharp, cracking sound," and Youngblood, "whirling in his seat," grabbed Vice President Lyndon Johnson and threw him to the floor of the car, "shielding his body with his own."

In any presidential party, the Secret Service guys are the ones who are mature, who you can count on, who'll keep their heads. They have judgment, they're by the book unless they have to rewrite it on a second's notice. And they wore suits, like adults.

This week I saw a picture of agents in Colombia. They were in T-shirts, wrinkled khakis and sneakers. They looked like a bunch of mooks, like slobs, like children with muscles.

Special thanks to the person who invented casual Friday. Now it's casual everyday in America. But when you lower standards people don't decide to give you more, they give you less.

In New York the past week a big story has been about 16 public school teachers who can't be fired even though they've acted unprofessionally. What does "unprofessionally" mean in New York? Sex with students, stalking students, and, in one case, standing behind a kid, simulating sex, and saying, "I'll show you what gay is."

The kids in the flash mobs: These are their teachers.

Finally, as this column goes to press, the journalistic story of the week, the Los Angeles Times's decision to publish pictures of U.S. troops in Afghanistan who smilingly posed with the bloody body parts of suicide bombers. The soldier who brought the pictures to the Times told their veteran war correspondent, David Zucchino, that he was, in Zucchino's words, "very concerned about what he said was a breakdown in . . . discipline and professionalism" among the troops.

In isolation, these stories may sound like the usual sins and scandals, but in the aggregate they seem like something more disturbing, more laden with implication, don't they? And again, these are only from the past week.

The leveling or deterioration of public behavior has got to be worrying people who have enough years on them to judge with some perspective.

Something seems to be going terribly wrong.

Maybe we have to stop and think about this.