FROM: Phyllis Schlafly
68 FAIRMOUNT, ALTON, ILLINOIS 62002 (618) 462-5415

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THE MORALITY GAP

The favorite question asked by reporters this season is, "Aren't you concerned about the 'Moral Majority' and the entry of preachers and religious groups into the political process?" Reporters often follow up with questions about the alleged threat of "making political decisions on moral criteria."

Left-wing fund-raisers have gone heavily "into the mails" with fund-raising "packages" filled with emotional hysteria, much underscoring, asterisks, and the frequent use of buzz words calculated to make one's blood run hot. Here is some of the flamboyant rhetoric -- all underscored in the original -- in a letter signed by the erstwhile Senator from South Dakota, George McGovern: "The danger is clear. The danger is present. The time to act is now."

And what is this terrible "danger" he is so exercised about? The danger that prayer might be restored to public schools, that parents might be allowed to review textbooks before they are given to their own children, and that public schools might teach "creationism" as well as evolution.

TV script-writer Norman Lear is trying to raise $5 million for the first year of operation of his new organization designed to counteract what he labels "the pernicious danger" of religious groups in politics. Like an oldstyle orator emoting and handwaving, Lear opens his appeal for funds with this tear-jerker: "If I live to be a thousand, I may never write a letter that is more important to me than this one."

Those who feel threatened by the entry of religious groups into politics are trying hard to convey the notion that there is something un-American about applying moral principles to politics, and something offensive about religious groups and leaders entering the political arena. But who is really out of step -- the secular political and media leaders who have been running the country for the last couple of decades, or the religiously-oriented leaders who have become political powers and spokesmen today?

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The answer to that question was the surprise result of a major study recently completed by Research and Forecasts Inc., which had been commissioned by the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Co. to explore American values of the 1980s and the extent to which those values are shared by our leaders. The study concluded that U.S. leaders are out of step with the American public, which is more concerned about moral values than are the top people in most fields such as politics, the news media, science and education.

"It is clear there is a dramatic gap," John C. Pollock, the project's research director, said. "Overall, leaders are different from the public. They don't represent the public."

Mr. Pollock was apprently stunned by the results of the study he directed. He hadn't structured the survey to inquire about religion at all, but the report concluded that religion emerged as "the one factor that consistently and dramatically affects the values and behavior of Americans."

"We had no idea we'd find this," Pollock said, "but there it was, showing up in every sort of systematic analysis, a common thread. It's more than a movement. It's something running through the whole culture."

The 337-page report is the result of 2,018 hour-long interviews with a random, nationally-distributed sample of the public, plus responses to eight-page questionnaires from 1,762 leaders in business, law, education, government, military, the news media, religion, science, and voluntary associations. That's about twice as large a sample as is used in the typical Gallup, Harris or Roper polls.

Guess which group was found to be closest to the public in beliefs and attitudes. Not politicians, not the media, but the clergy. Are you ready for the second surprise? Businessmen came in second.

The message coming out of this report is that American leaders as a group prove the old adage that birds of a feather flock together, but the flocks of leaders clustering in their New York and Washington, D.C. cloisters are simply out of touch and out of step with the morals, the values, the goals, and the needs of the American people.

It's beginning to look as though the morality gap, rather than the misery index, was the decisive factor in the November 1980 election.

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