

The Call for a Moral Ombudsman

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I am calling for the creation of a non-profit organization whose constituency would be

all

Americans. This institute would ignore political affiliation or economic clout when evaluating events in the political field. Issuing its decisions in policy papers, op-ed articles, press releases, scorecards on the votes of public servants and reaching out in other manners, this non-profit watchdog would create an agreed upon

moral

center from which to judge the legislation and the public actions of our elected leaders.

By developing and implementing a moral matrix – developed by a wide collection of religious leaders – in our public square, a Moral Ombudsman would turn the political discussion away from what is most politically expedient and/or monetarily remunerative for a lucky few and toward a view that is helpful to the greatest number of our fellow citizens, and specifically those most in need.

The board of directors of the Moral Ombudsman would be made up of representatives from 19 different religious and ethical bodies, which represent more than 95% of this country's citizens. These would include a single representative from Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Letter-Day Saints (Mormon), United Church of Christ, Jehovah's Witness, Pentecostal, secular humanists, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Unitarian, Native American, Baha'i and Sikhism.

Additionally, to add weight to the project, a collection of past political leaders who themselves might have been frustrated with the lack of a moral center to politics, would be asked to sign on to the project as honorary co-sponsors, thereby lending political gravitas to a program that could easily be marginalized by the current power-brokers. Such past leaders as Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, Warren Rudman, Bill Cohen and others would be approached and, hopefully, many would see the worth of such an endeavor and lend their name to the project.

All decisions on where lay the moral center for specific issues would be based on consensus. Participants would base their decisions on their own scriptures and belief system, instead of the political field, polls or expediency. If at least three-quarters of the participants agreed on a particular issue, a paper would be issued to that effect, while noting the dissenters and their reasons. While clearly not a perfect schema, when attempting to knit 95% of such a diverse country as ours together under a "moral mantle," the challenges must be met head on and imperfections acknowledged.

Initially, the representatives from these 19 denominations would gather, along with a single, non-voting chairperson of the board who would facilitate the meetings, to talk over the specific aspects of morality and the public square. First of all, the most important general public and political issues would be identified and discussed from the moral perspective of each of the 19 religious bodies. The environment; death penalty; true meaning of the Second Amendment; public monies spent on tax cuts v. social safety net; criminal system based on revenge and "public safety" v. a prison system based on forgiveness; a foreign policy based on fear or love; the role of money in the electoral process; the role of truth in public discourse (as opposed to the "objectivity" of the press or "national security interests") and other specific, pressing issues would be brought up, discussed and then moved toward a consensus moral center.

Ultimately, the decision would be made as to what would be the *moral* response to these issues? In a perfect (and morally-based) world, how would specific issues be dealt with in the public square?

Once positions were taken on the major issues of the day, press releases, press conferences and position papers would be released on these same subjects. Included in this would be a series of scorecards of specific legislators, pointing out where they stood in relation to this agreed upon moral center.

After this initial staking out a moral center on the important issues of the day, the group would then settle in for the work ahead. As legislation was brought up in congress, it would be compared to already agreed upon moral strictures. If the new legislation didn't fit into a standing moral rubric, the group would once again decide what the moral position was on specific legislation and issue a position paper, using all of the familiar outlets to get the word out.

Additionally, a series of conferences and talks would be set up, influencing the public discourse on a variety of issues. For instance, what would a morally based foreign policy look like? Currently, the U.S. foreign-aid budget as a percentage of gross national product (GNP) ranks last among the world's wealthiest countries (at about 0.1 percent). What is the moral response to this figure? And how does this compare with our half-trillion dollars spent annually on "national defense?" Does the current application of funds truly make us "safer," or would a morally based, more peaceful expenditure of dollars make us more secure than we in fact currently are?

Perhaps there would be a conference on the role of truth in public discourse. After all, most journalists opt for "objectivity" – a midpoint between the two major political parties – eschewing truth. Are journalists complicit in the breakdown of a moral center by not hewing to truth when reporting stories, afraid that they might thereby "offend" important sources, which would dry up? What obligation does the journalistic community have in helping move the public discourse towards a moral center, and away from a spurious "objectivity," where the center skitters across the political spectrum as one or the other political party gains the upper hand?

There might be a conference on envisioning a pluralistic election system completely devoid of private money – with each candidate being forced to run on his or her program and positions, all spending the same amount of public funding. Would it open the field for other, disparate voices, outside of the two dominant political parties? Specifically, would it help lead us to a more moral politics?

The possibilities are endless – and profoundly important. By injecting a moral center into the public scrum, the whole context within which we see the political process, which is currently limned by political advertising and the press, would be changed for the better, proffering a center that would not move with the political winds. By setting up and hewing to a moral reference point, the Moral Ombudsman would help to change the public discourse and, at its very best, lead our country out of the wilderness of competing, personal and corporate interests towards a politics where the true constituency would be the people themselves.