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## America Always Need a Strong Leader

If one goes back far enough I think it's hard to argue for anything other than for an increase in morality and ethics of Americans given the fact that 155 years we still owned slaves, 98 years ago women couldn't vote, and 64 years ago black students could not attend the same schools as whites. Strike and Soltis (2009) make the case that a respect for personhood is one of the most important ethical standards, and one that many other ethical arguments are based on. Given the clear and demonstrable evidence that Americans have a deeper respect for personhood and the belief that all people are "free, rational, moral agents" than they did 155 years ago when people were bought and sold as a class of sub-humans, it's impossible to see anything other than an improvement of morality and ethics. What of more recent history then when we don't have the benefit of simply pointing to an expansion of rights to demonstrate that America is more ethical? In this area, I think it's less clear on its face and would require empirical social science to study. However, if you ask for my opinion on the matter then I believe that there are two clear trends that would lead me to believe Americans are less ethical than they were in the recent past.

### An Unprecedented Unethical Leader

The first area that I would point to demonstrate a decline in ethics would be to our leader. I believe that Donald Trump is far and away the most unethical president within my lifetime. Politicians have always had ethical issues and scandals, but in the past I believe that politicians were easily attached to them with a single word or phrase. For example, Ronald Reagan and Iran-Contra, Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, or Anthony Weiner and sexting. President Trump seems to have an endless array of scandals and ethical shortcomings attached to him. There is so much levied against him that is nearly impossible for the average American to keep up with it all. Stormy Daniels, the Access Hollywood tapes, the Russian investigation, Karen McDougal, the firing of James Comey, abuse of the presidential pardon, or child concentration camps might all come to mind in relation to President Trump. On top of these scandals he also breaks ethical norms of our past presidents such as by failing to release his tax returns or failing to divest his personal business interests before assuming office. This norm breaking has led to a myriad of ethical considerations from Emolument Clause considerations to being unable to evaluate claims of Russian ties. This past January two former White House Ethics Lawyers, one a Republican and one a Democrat, named Trump's first year in office as the most unethical presidency ever (NPR, 2018).

In addition to the scandals he also shows reverence and support to authoritarian dictators while simultaneously attacking our oldest allies and alliances that were built to keep the world safe. He shows disdain for our country's democratic processes, he attacks those who oppose him as traitors, and he echoes Joseph Stalin's refrain that the free press is an enemy of the people. He is a racist, a sexist, and a sexual predator. He lies at a speed and frequency unmatched by any other politician. He lies about matters big and small, and about things that can easily be proven false by a simple Google search or by opening our eyes. It is the gaslighting of America. The other day he told a crowd of supporters "Just remember, what you are seeing and what you are reading is not what's happening" (Moye, 2018). In normal times I feel as though I would consider people making claims of a president being Orwellian in nature as alarmist, but what

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else can be said of such a statement? I believe this presents multiple problems to teachers and our public schools. First, teachers have an ethical duty to “not unreasonably deny the student access to varying points of view” (NEA Code of Ethics, Principle 2).

I think that a president that is so unethical and who lies so frequently can make this requirement challenging. Students should be able to examine facts and use their own world view and personhood as a moral agent to draw conclusions from those facts. However, the president frequently and often creates his own facts. I don't believe that the president, or students, are entitled to their own facts. There is only one reality, even if the president would like to create his own. It is challenging for me or any school teacher to know when it is correct to acknowledge lies as lies versus when they are acceptable points of view that must be respected under the ethical codes. My proposed solution to this is simply to approach matters cautiously. To carefully evaluate each claim. Also I believe in being forthright with students. I believe it's important to teach students about perspective and about facts. To teach them how they can use fact checking services, how to evaluate authors and trace where money for that article or study came from, and all other manners of critically examining evidence. To caution them about valuing the teacher's opinion more than other voices. I just wish that we had a leader who was more ethically bound by the truth so that separating facts from opinions was not so difficult, and did not require evaluation each and every day. Pressure to Succeed I also think Americans are under more pressure to succeed than ever before. Similarly to our case study this week, I believe that this pressure to succeed is causing a decline in ethics in Americans. Maxwell (2005) devotes an entire section in *The 360 Degree Leader* about finding fulfillment where we are right now. He proceeds to offer a few suggestions on how believing in a team, defining successes in terms of teams, and putting the team above self can result in fulfillment at any position. He concludes by saying “that's what leadership is really about- it's about helping others to win. That's much more important than where you are in the organizational chart” (p. 63).

I think John C. Maxwell is correct, and I suspect that from reading over our forum posts from last week about leaders that we chose many will point to selflessness or teamwork as a quality they admired in their leader. However, there is a problem with these statements. To me they are made by a person who is a product of their time. John C. Maxwell was born in 1947. He's 71 years old. He grew up in an America where being in the middle was something to be proud of. The 1950s were a time of unmatched prosperity for the American middle class. I think finding fulfillment as part of a team no matter where you are on the “organizational chart” was so much easier during this time in America (assuming one was part of the majority). A middle class American in the 1950s could support an entire family on one income. They could own a home and a car, and expect that their children would be in a better position than they were. In popular culture it's what is known as the American Dream.

Since 1970 income inequality has grown in the United States under every possible measure. Americans in the top 10% of earners make nine times those that are below them, while those in the top 1% earn on average 40 times more income than those in the bottom 90%. Real wages for American workers have stagnated, while CEO and top earners wages have skyrocketed. All of this has occurred at the same time that the United States' economy has steadily increased over time. Simply put, America has made more, while most Americans have not. Meanwhile average Americans are increasingly saddled with debt be it from the increase cost in home ownership, to car loans, credit card debt, medical debt, and the ever increasing cost of college educations. When the middle class can afford so little while the rich can afford so much the

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pressure to escape the middle is great as is the pressure to remain on top. Finding fulfillment at your place on the chart becomes difficult when you struggle to afford a good life. Consider the fact that of the nearly 43 million Americans currently receiving benefits from SNAP (previously called food stamps) 44% have at least one household member who is working, and for those receiving benefits with children 55% have at least one member who is employed (Godoy & Aubrey, 2017).

According to a report from CNNMoney, 43% of American families cannot afford the basic necessities that would constitute a “middle class” lifestyle (Luhby, 2018). Is it any wonder that ethics might decrease in such a society? At the same time that economic inequality has been growing, so too has political inequality been expanding. Campaigns are ever increasingly funded by the top 1%, causing our politicians to be beholden to their will and not that of average Americans (Cha, 2013). Those in power seek to maintain their hold over us by limiting voter rights through voter identification laws or in voter registration purges, policies that disproportionately impact the voting power of the lower class and of racial minorities. Politicians engage in ridiculous gerrymandering techniques to further concentrate power to the few and ensure easy party victories where people feel less incentivized to participate in democracy at all. All of these political inequalities have had serious consequences upon our democracy. Political scientists Gillens and Page studied thousands of preferences of Americans and compared them to Congressional outcomes over decades and concluded “When the preferences of economic elites and the stands of organized interest groups are controlled for, the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy” (Mounk, 2018).

In American today, your place on the organizational chart does indeed seem to matter. We have created a society that is controlled by the ultra-wealthy for the benefit of ultra-wealthy. Yet we somehow expect those in the middle or lower classes to act ethically and morally in their pursuit for a better life? We expect those who comprise the ultra-wealthy to act morally and ethically in their pursuit of maintaining such status? When so much is at stake, it appears entirely reasonable to me that Americans would act less ethically.

As President Obama once said and as punk rock singer Greg Graffin once sang, when it comes to America, “this is the tale of Robin Hood, in reverse.” Schools cannot be the source of economic or political reform, but I believe there are still some things that can be done even without any change in policy. First, I think that teachers can be aware and compassionate of the pressures to succeed in the modern American economy. Personally, I had already decided to focus much of the courses I teach on a project based learning style. I preferred this approach based upon the things we learned about in our Education Technology course, and on my beliefs on what is important in the field of social studies. Upon reflection this week, I will add that this approach also has the added benefit of not creating additional high stakes tests or moments for students. If projects are not appropriate for your class or for a particular lesson, you can still construct your class in ways that create opportunities for students to improve over time and decrease the risk of failing on high stakes tests. Second, I think that teachers can employ the lessons from our Education Technology course about teaching for a 21st century economy. Students need to learn and be taught the proper tools to have a chance to succeed in our current economy. Perhaps if they are confident that they are learning what it takes to be successful, it will reduce some pressure to make unethical decisions to achieve their goals. Finally, I believe that schools can teach students about America and about the world at large truthfully and accurately. Students need to understand what has made America great in the

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past, and where it has fallen woefully short.

Accurately portraying the story of America can teach all kinds of important lessons, including the ethical and leadership ideals presented in this course. The ideals and focus on individual personhood favored by Strike and Soltis can be taught by exploring America's pursuit of freedoms and the realization of Jefferson's creed of "all men are created equal" for more and more Americans over time. Perhaps even more importantly it can tell of how progress was not a steady march of inevitability, but instead tell how those rights had to be fought for, not only upon the battlefield, but on our streets, in our courtrooms, and in our classrooms as well. Maxwell's arguments on the importance of leading from the middle can be taught by exploring how political movements that thousands of Americans participated in helped shape the course of America, rather than simply focusing only on "big name" leaders. Above all I think an accurate teaching of America's story can teach students that their voice can still matter, but that democracy is not a guarantee. I think this is imperative because I believe that the ultimate solution to both of the issues that I raise in this post is to elect ethical leaders that will fight to make America work for everyone.

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