

In a Democracy, Character Matters.
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This column is not just launching an attack on President Trump, although his character does matter. Rather, it explores the overall issue of good character and the role it plays in the survival of a democracy. Since John F. Kennedy's influential book *Profiles in Courage*, there has been little attention to what good character is and how essential it is in keeping us a good country.

Good character could be defined as behavior that promotes "doing the right thing," even when that thing is difficult and may have personal negative consequences. Those Congressmen who were persuaded to vote for the abolition of slavery knew that they had constituents who would react, sometimes violently. President Lincoln himself knew that by doing the right thing, he would be targeted for assassination by someone who didn't have "better angels."

Our legislators, from the start, have been a pragmatic lot, generally doing what would secure their continued power. But our presidents have given us more examples of either doing the right thing or its opposite.

Presidents John Quincy Adams (son of John Adams) and Andrew Jackson are examples of good vs. bad character. Adams was the last of the generation of founding fathers, men who risked everything for their "sacred honor" of birthing a new nation, a republic, with values of equality and rule of law. Had Britain won the Revolutionary War, all of these men would have been executed as traitors to the crown and their property confiscated. That they went forward anyway is a tribute to their character.

The first of our presidents with a demonstrably bad character was Andrew Jackson, a man whose election was guaranteed by giving the vote to all White males, even those illiterate and drunk, unlike the previous voting rolls of educated property owners. Populism was born, and it resulted in electing a president who ordered a near-genocide of the Cherokee Indians who were forced to abandon their farms (a land grab) in a death march to Oklahoma. The Supreme Court ordered Jackson to cease and desist, but he defied the court.

While Jackson was trashing our checks and balances, John Quincy Adams (who lost his re-election to Jackson) showed his unique decency by serving as Congressman from Massachusetts for the next 17 years. His last principled act was to serve as a lawyer defending slaves who seized their slave ship and sailed to port in America. The prosecutors wanted the slaves returned to their "owners." Adams succeeded in winning the case, sending the captives back to their homes. That was indeed a profile in courage.

Today, we have a president who is model of bad character (even those of you who voted for him know this but don't care), but he is not alone. He is supported by political appointees to cabinet posts who are indifferent to doing the right thing. Several have been appointed to devastate the departments they are supposed to run. Some legislators themselves are undergoing exposure for bad behavior (monetary and sexual), leaving us with few examples of good character.

How we talk to each other supports or defies our better selves. Coarse and misleading language has become endemic, leaving us with few models of decency. When this president promotes "religious freedom," he doesn't include freedom from religion. He wants "true believers" (fanatics) to impose their values on everyone else. When funding is pulled from UNICEF's women's medical centers around the world because they might offer abortions, women are abandoned to the involuntary servitude of enforced pregnancy and deprived of care for a myriad of female illnesses. How can that be right?

In a decent country, leaders have empathy for the suffering of others, produce just laws (derived after bipartisan debate), and respect checks and balances. Decent voters should pay attention to the character of those who lead us. Pious hypocrites should be dumped. We need an annual "Profiles in Courage" awards program that encourages those who govern us to demonstrate good character.

661 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of *God's Law or Man's Law*. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.