Beyond Arthur Andersen
Searching for answers
Roger K. Doost
School of Accountancy and Legal Studies, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina, USA, and
Teddi Fishman
Department of English, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina, USA

Keywords Business ethics, Fraud, Corruption

Abstract Recent corporate scandals, fraud, and misuse of resources involving top executives and multi-billion dollar companies such as Sunbeam, Tyco, Medco, Enron, Worldcom, the NYSE and others – not to mention accounting giant, Arthur Andersen, threaten the viability and continued success of the US economy, the global economy, and world-wide political stability. Stock markets, employees’ pension funds, national employment rates, and the ability of citizens to trust in economic systems are all adversely affected. It is time, therefore, to begin to assess and recognize actual risks and costs of political and corporate breeches of ethics.

Introduction
Lord Acton’s observation that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely” seems increasingly on point with regard to lapses in morals, ethics, and sound judgment in corporate and political America. The unprecedented military, economic, and political power of this nation, increases the potential effect of incidents involving scandal, corruption and fraud, magnifying domestic and international repercussions. Not since the initial years of this republic in 1776 and the advent of the industrial revolution at about the same time has the nation faced such havoc in its political and economic conditions.

The purpose of this paper is not to delve into specific cases of wrong-doing. Rather, our purpose is to investigate the causes, contexts, and especially the costs of high profile ethical breaches in social, economic, and political terms. Most importantly, our purpose is to ask what we can learn from such experiences and contribute to the ethical as well as the economic health of this nation and attempt, no matter how inadequately, to make the world a better, safer, more equitable place to live. We live in times of unprecedented economic and political change, and with that change comes the opportunity to shape the future. With opportunity, however, comes responsibility, and it is now our responsibility to assess the events of the past 50 years and try to learn from what we have done in order to discover how we can make the next 50 years better for America and the rest of humanity. It is in this context that we first review briefly the political/economic landscape of America and get the help of renowned scholar Alan Bloom who worried about our condition and our future if drastic changes were not taken.

Historical background – a mix of politics and economics
Following the Second World War and the defeat of the axis powers, there was an amazing sense of optimism. Rather than continuing to punish the defeated countries,
the USA took both the moral high road and a well thought out economic risk when it helped rebuild Germany and Japan (as well as the rest of the devastated Europe) in hopes of promoting future democracies that would shine and successful democracies that would later flourish. Having learned a lesson from the First World War, after which the defeated powers were left humiliated and economically devastated, the allies sought to avoid paving the way for another global war by investing billions of dollars in the form of grants and loans. The Marshall Plan assisted the rebuilding of Europe, and smaller amounts were allotted to the developing nations in Asia and Africa. Despite these efforts to achieve lasting peace, however, the USA continued to fear the threat of Communism as evidenced by political policies that continued the practice of preparing for war. Uneasy about the designs and the intentions of Stalin and the Communist regimes where unprecedented atrocities were taking place, the US Government continued to amass weapons and prepare for conflict. Despite the drain on resources, this expenditure was considered essential to protecting American interests. Domestically, Americans who were relieved at the end of hostilities started rebuilding their lives and taking advantage of the tremendous business and work opportunities domestically and in overseas markets (Current et al., 1983).

1950s
As if by self-fulfilling prophecy, the Korean conflict arose, in which over 140,000 Americans and millions of Koreans were killed. Korea was partitioned into the free zone (South Korea), and the Communist regime in the north. Americans, however, always had conflicting opinions as to their obligations and interests in helping other nations. Although many Americans supported intervention, perhaps even more supported a quick withdrawal. The existence of a foreign enemy, however, enabled Senator John McCarthy to silence, undermine and in some cases imprison domestic groups and individuals by labeling them communists or communist sympathizers. Throughout this era, a sense of unease and insecurity existed even though there was no direct domestic threat. Although corporations were still prospering and the economic system was generally healthy and viable, many lives were ruined and many Americans lost faith in the Government which would never be completely regained. Although the threat of Communism was largely economic, the Government communicated it and addressed it in terms of national security. Under the auspices of fighting Communism, the Central Intelligence Agency undertook a series of covert operations to destabilize potentially unfriendly governments, starting with the Government of Iran in 1953 (Gasiorowski, 1991). From then on, America, which had enjoyed and benefited from its reputation as a promoter of liberty and democracy across the globe, started to be viewed quite differently by not only unfriendly regimes but also groups and nations whose interests conflicted with our own. Having experienced the effects of conflict on an increasingly global scale, Americans were left wondering what the effect of these negative perceptions might be.

1960s
This decade began with the inauguration speech in which President John F. Kennedy challenged Americans to “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” With renewed idealism and determination, he sent American youth on Peace Corps missions around the globe and projected that we would land on
the Moon by the end of the decade. Our preoccupation with Communism had not ended, however, and resulted in another foreign conflict. The Vietnam War took its toll on Americans. We were a divided nation – those who continued to defend the war because of its stated purpose in containing Communism and in defense of “our freedom,” and those who had become totally vocal and hostile to a war which was devastating the southeast region of Asia and bringing with it an unprecedented level of death and destruction as well as ill-defined goals and objectives. Covert operations continued to subvert governments that were considered hostile to US interests, replacing them with more favorable regimes in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, and Chile. Many of the younger generation, particularly those whom the unpopular military draft most directly affected became totally alienated from the political system. Their pent-up energy which had no satisfactory outlet within the existing political system was released via an anti-war movement, and social movements that promoted increased sexual freedom, use of drugs, newer forms of music, and acceptance on the part of many that to try to change “the system” was futile. The tacit acceptance of sex and drugs provided an illusion of freedom and a diversion and distraction from the more acute problems that the nation and her elected officials were facing. The decade ended in violence with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, his brother and presidential candidate, Robert Kennedy as well as the civil rights leader, Martin Luther King leaving a vacuum of political and social idealism. The nation built on the visions and promises of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson (life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness), Abraham Lincoln (government of the people, by the people, and for the people), and Franklin Roosevelt (we must seek freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom of expression …) found itself questioning the extent to which those ideals could, in fact, be realized.

1970s
This decade began without the optimism of the Kennedys but with much of the fear of communism that had marked the previous decade. The Vietnam War which, by this time, had resulted in the death or injury to millions of Vietnamese, destruction of that small country, and the death of over 58,000 American soldiers and trillions of dollars in cost in the course of some 16 years continued. President Nixon ordered more aggressive bombings in order to end the war and force the Vietnamese to accept our terms and partition Vietnam. In the meantime, the war had spread to the neighboring Laos as well as Cambodia and the cruel Pol Pot regime that took over and slaughtered some 40 percent of a population of 7 million within a short span of time. The United Nations, America, and the world’s other great powers watched, unable or unwilling to intervene, claiming that they had no vital interest to defend. America’s attention was directed, instead, toward the Watergate scandal. Americans watched as the story of burglaries authorized and sanctioned by the President of the USA, Richard M. Nixon, unfolded before their eyes. Months of congressional hearings, testimony, and denials by the president and his staff concluded with Nixon’s resignation and various jail terms for many of his closest associates. Americans were divided along partisan political lines as they debated whether, had Nixon served during the term of a Republican Congress, there would have been talk of impeachment. It is a known fact that had this incident happened in a congress with a Republican majority, there would not have been any talk of impeachment.
While the furor over Watergate continued, political changes were occurring with respect to domestic and international politics. After Nixon was pardoned and Gerald Ford sworn into the office and shortly thereafter, Senator Church introduced legislation to put an end to sanctioned killing of political leaders in other countries which was signed into law by President Ford in 1976. As if looking for an antidote to the perceived ethical vacuum in the Whitehouse, voters elected Jimmy Carter who had run on a platform more about decency and honesty than the political experience and who vowed to promote human rights in other regions of the globe. Both the decade and the Carter presidency ended with the Iranian revolution and the exile of the Shah who was, a little earlier, toasted by president Jimmy Carter, as a strong leader who is maintaining stability in the region. In the chaos that ensued, US embassy employees were held hostage for some 444 days. Despite intense negotiations, the hostages were not released while Carter was in office. Instead, by prior arrangement, the hostages were let go on President Reagan's inauguration day in January 1980 (Milani, 1989). In the meantime, Russians had invaded Afghanistan and soon had installed a puppet regime. At the urging of National Security Advisor, Breszinski, America embarked upon a plan to “give Russians their Vietnam in Afghanistan” (Gohari, 2000). At home, Americans struggled with inflation, unemployment, continued racial tension and an economy in transition even as billions of dollars continued to be spent on the “cold war.” Many questioned the wisdom of extravagant defense spending rather than a federal budget with a greater emphasis on domestic concerns.

1980s
President Reagan was elected on campaign slogans that promised a renewed vision and strength. Touting the virtues of “trickle down economics,” Reagan advanced the agenda to decreasing corporate regulation and oversight. Outside the USA, Saddam Hussein attacked Iran in 1980. Shortly thereafter, the USA allied itself with Iraq as the “lesser of the two evils,” providing billions of dollars of financing and authorizations for the purchase of the most lethal and destructive ammunitions and weapons from arms manufacturers in America as well as France, Germany, the UK, Austria, and other European nations. In total, some 70 billion dollars of arms including the so-called “weapons of mass destruction” were sold to Iraq during the 1980s with approximately the same amount sold to Saudi Arabia on the grounds that the Saudis would need the arms to balance out any potential threat to themselves. Iraq used the newly acquired weapons in the fight against Iran, to gas Iranians, and later, to gas Iraq’s own Kurdish citizens (Hiro, 1991). By most estimates, the eight year Iran-Iraq war left more than 2 million people dead or severely maimed and billions of dollars of devastation particularly in the oil and industry rich region of Khuzestan in Iran.

In 1983, the US embassy in Beirut was attacked by terrorists, who succeeded in killing some 70 Americans. This attack was followed by an attack on marine barracks that killed 243 marines. Terrorist acts, particularly those against US embassies, military units, and other Western interests continued to occur in the Middle East and in East Africa with no decisive retaliatory action on the part of America. In fact, after the marines were attacked in Beirut, the USA simply pulled out. This way out seemed to be more expedient and less messy. Without focus or observable effect, the American response was perceived as timid and fruitless. Meanwhile, Egyptian and Saudi
dissidents and fanatics first camped in Sudan and then took their operation to Afghanistan to fight the Russian “infidels” with the help of the USA.

During Reagan’s second term, the Iran-Contra affair came to the surface. Although there were sanctions against Iran and the state department had issued several directives cautioning the allies not to sell arms to Iran, it was revealed that a special office within the Whitehouse, managed by Admiral Pointdexter with Colonel Oliver North acting as go-between, had sold arms to Iran covertly and diverted funds to Nicaraguan rebels who were undermining political and social instability within Nicaragua. While Colonel North purported to be dealing with more moderate elements of the Iranian Government, evidence offered during hearings and Colonel North’s trial indicated that was not the case. The congressional hearings that ensued were mild and no serious conclusions were reached. Both the president and vice president denied any knowledge about the operation while the American public learned the term “plausible deniability.” Oliver North, or “Colonel bi-mokh”! as he was known to his Iranian contacts, ran for congress, lost, and now serves as a conservative television and radio commentator.

When hostilities finally ended between Iran and Iraq in 1988 after the expenditure of billions of dollars and the destruction of over 2 million people (either dead or maimed), American attention focused on the unpredictability and perceived threat of Saddam Hussein, the large army that we had helped him create, and the sophisticated amounts of armaments that he had at his disposal. Although few Americans worried much about a Middle-Eastern dictator thousands of miles from their border, the relationship between the USA and Iraq deteriorated rapidly as the web was becoming more entangled (Mackey, 2002a).

On the domestic front, scandals oddly reminiscent of the McCarthy era arose when “whistleblowers” in various industries brought problems to light and were subsequently terminated. When environmental crimes were detected and reported by certain employees of a firm in New Jersey, coercive attempts were made to silence them. Following the Shuttle disaster of 1985 that resulted in the death of the astronauts and the destruction of their Shuttle, individuals who brought to surface the problems were either terminated or brought under severe pressures that resulted in their resignation. In response, congress passed laws that were meant to protect whistleblowers from undue retaliation and help avoid similar disasters in the future reflecting the desire on the part of the American people to expose and eliminate corrupt and dangerous practices, but particularly in light of decreased regulation, such measures did little to reduce the amount and significance of corporate and political scandals.

Another possible contributor to the increase in unethical behavior may have been a new economic theory that had been put forth by Professor Hayeck of the University of Chicago for years and suggested (opposite to the prevalent Keynesian macro-economic theory which supported government intervention to monitor economic progress) that only full force deregulation, less taxation, and promotion of free enterprise in the idealistic format of capitalism envisioned by Adam Smith can lead to true economic progress (Mackey, 2002b). President Reagan in the USA and his counterpart in the UK, Prime Minister Thatcher, embraced the model which became known as “Reagonomics” or “trickle-down economics.” Noble prize winner Milton Freedman became a vocal promoter of the idea. Under the governmental auspices, however, taxes for those in the
higher brackets were lowered and social services and welfare programs that Democrats had promoted were severely cut. As companies took advantage of decreased regulation and became more efficient or found smarter ways of producing by moving their operations overseas, lower level employees and middle management were losing ground. Wealth creation and acceptance of unbridled personal ambition as a virtue was on the upswing in an unprecedented way. The decade ended with huge scandals in the area of insider trading leading to the conviction of the two most flagrant violators, Ian Bosky and Michael Milken, who were fined by the Securities and Exchange Commission for some 100 and 600 million dollars respectively. In another incident of a similar kind, auditors were found at least partly at fault when billions of dollars were written off in the Savings and Loan Association scandals. The majority of these associations failed and the burden was shifted to the federal government to pay back the depositors.

1990s
The human comedy (or tragedy?) continued in America and abroad. Iran’s Ayatollahs were still instigating the masses against the USA (Esposito and Ramazani, 2001). Iraq found itself in a position oddly similar to that of Germany after the Second World War, nearly bankrupt after the war with nothing achieved, a little hungry for respect and victory. Having picked the little (but oil rich) country of Kuwait in the south for some easy access to cash, Saddam Hussein asked the US Ambassador in Baghdad, April Guillespie, for tacit approval for his proposed invasion of Kuwait. According to the Ambassador’s own words (during an interview on CNN), she told Saddam that the USA would consider such action beyond its interest for interference. Emboldened by such a statement, Saddam went ahead with his invasion plan, occupied and brutalized Kuwait and brought further death and destruction to the region. Soon after, President Bush with his lieutenants, Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, and Secretary of State, Jim Baker formed an international coalition to repel the aggression and perhaps even get rid of Saddam. The Arab countries in the region as well as other allies were asked to foot the bill.

In January 1991, the coalition forces led by the USA and with the approval of the United Nations started bombarding Baghdad and defeated Saddam, pushing his troops back to Iraq in less than a month. With the blessing of General Schwartzkopf, a cease fire agreement was signed that left Saddam in power. Although President Bush encouraged Iraqis to rise against the brutal regime and overthrow Saddam, when the Shias in the south and the Kurds in the north rose against him, the USA offered no support or protection. In a matter of months, Saddam crushed all his opposition, executed thousands of people and solidified his power. The policy of keeping Saddam contained had started. As part of the cease fire agreement, teams of inspectors were sent to Iraq to identify and destroy his weapons of mass destruction. Several times, he reneged and received continuous punishment by American forces. A no-fly zone was created for protection of the Kurds in the north after the images of hundreds of thousands of Kurds who had taken refuge in the mountains became too much to stomach. A no-fly zone was created for the protection of the people of Iraq in the north and in the south, and a regular bombardment of strategic positions in Iraq continued throughout the 1990s (Mackey, 2002a).
The economy was in recession, but the president enjoyed a high approval rating during and following the brief war. As the presidential election approached, however, the focus of Americans, however, had once again turned to domestic economics and in a three-way contest between Bill Clinton and the millionaire Ross Perot, George Bush lost, and Bill Clinton was elected thanks to a campaign platform that promised to concentrate on the economy – “it is the economy, stupid!”. Following the Gulf War, the USA tried once again to participate proactively in a humanitarian operation in Somalia. However, after some US marines were killed and dragged through the dusty streets, the USA decided to pull out again. Domestic terrorists were busy too and increasingly effective with the most horrific action being the Oklahoma city bombing during 1990s which, in pre 9/11 history, represented the most tragic act of terrorism in America. Timothy McVeigh, who had served as a soldier in the Gulf War before becoming the major perpetrator of the Oklahoma City bombing was apparently taking revenge against the Government for what he perceived as hostile and unconstitutional actions that had been taken against domestic militia groups. The high-profile cases of Ruby Ridge and elsewhere (in which the Government had interfered with the operations of fringe groups) had served as a catalyst to McVeigh and co-conspirator Terry Nichols. Other domestic unrest continued as racial tensions continued. In one of the most disturbing incidents, an African American man was tied to the back of a truck and dragged until he was totally mutilated by a couple of racist youth in the city of Jasper, Texas (Mackey, 2001).

Although the income gap between rich and poor continued to grow, the economy appeared strong during the remaining years of the 1990s. Moreover, the strong perception of the health of economy allowed the stock market to skyrocket. The Dow Jones industrial average that had started with an average of 1,000 in 1980 had passed the 10,000 mark toward the end of the decade. Although the economy prospered, Americans had a love/hate relationship with the Clintons from the start. It seemed that there was no middle ground. The president’s healthcare initiative, one of the cornerstones of his campaign was rejected by congress and was soon abandoned. Military intervention in Somalia was unsuccessful and was aborted after several US servicemen were ambushed and brutally killed. In the mid-term congressional election of 1994, democrats lost many seats to Republicans, and Newt Gingrich announced his “contract with America” theme. The battle lines between Democrats and the President and congress were drawn, leading to the budget impasse of 1994 which in turn nearly led to a shutdown of the Government.

While politics were becoming progressively more polarized, the attention of the country was focused more on the Hollywood style drama of the O.J. Simpson trial. For months and months, major television channels devoted hours to the proceedings of the trial of the ex-football star, accused of killing his ex-wife Nicole and her guest, Ron Goldman. Despite seemingly irrefutable DNA evidence, Simpson was found not guilty, leading many who had followed the trial to conclude that money was more important than truth in determining the outcome of his trial. During the course of the trial on another continent, over 800,000 civilians were slaughtered and virtually hacked to death in Rawanda in a fight between rival Tutsi and Hutru tribes, an event that went largely unnoticed by Americans who were hypnotized by the O.J. Simpson trial. Likewise, the conflict in the former Yugoslavia and the Serb’s ethnic cleansing became an on-going drama, but one which seemed to exist as a background for more
immediate, more titillating domestic dramas. Even in Europe, no one wanted to take
the lead for any action until the USA took the lead and General Wesley Clarke, the
commander of NATO bombarded the Serb aggressors until they had to back off. This
effort convinced many Europeans that the USA was still willing and able to take
strong “moral” and military leadership even in the absence of pressing self-interest.

Still seemingly hungry for salacious scandals, Americans watched as President
Clinton was accused first of unethical real estate dealings regarding a failed
investment by the Clintons in Arkansas (Whitewater) and then to sexual
improprieties. A special prosecutor, Kenneth Starr, was installed and spent millions
of dollars obtaining convictions on several charges that would not have been
newsworthy but for the presidential connection. For months, the nightly news
reported details that would previously have been inexcusable to speak of in polite
conversation. Eventually, the president was found to have lied under oath about the
extent of his dalliances and was impeached, disgraced, but not removed from the
office. As the Clinton scandal ended, it was replaced with accusations concerning
Congressman Gary Condit and his connection to intern Chandra Levy. It was these
sordid details of the private lives of politicians rather than international conflicts or
political unrest abroad that captured public attention prior to the tragedies that
occurred on 11 September 2001.

2001 to present
The political decade started with the presidential election, voting irregularities, legal
maneuvers by both parties in Florida, and a decision by the Supreme Court that
determined the outcome of the election in favor of George W. Bush. Bush assumed
office and leadership of a country in which the stock market had peaked and begun a
downward spiral. As the president began to orchestrate a series of tax cuts and
regulation rollbacks, the country suffered the worst terrorist attack in its history when
several Middle Eastern terrorists high-jacked four commercial airplanes and attacked
the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, and a third
potential target which was aborted by the brave passengers who brought the plane
down in a wooded area in Pennsylvania. A sense of outrage combined with moral
indignation encompassed the nation and touched the hearts of millions around the
world. There were spontaneous prayer sessions all across the nation. Church
attendance shot up as a deep sense of loss, vulnerability, and determination to address
the wrong engulfed the nation. Adding to the tragedy was the recognition that the
tragedy may have been avoided had there not been major lapses in intelligence and
lack of coordination among various agencies whose job it is to keep the nation safe
(Lacayo and Ripley, 2002).

As Americans called for revenge, many seasoned leaders cautioned the nation
against unprincipled lashing out against innocent people. Since the perpetrators
themselves had all perished, it was decided to bring down the fanatical zealots of
Afghanistan who had supported the terrorists and their network. With the
understanding that the majority of the Afghan citizens were more concerned with
survival than terrorism, the USA provided food for the Afghans while targeting
Taliban and Alquaeda forces. The US actions led to the terrorists’ quick defeat, and at
the same time led a group of Afghan exiles to form a government and take over quickly
after their defeat while getting promises from several nations for the reconstruction of
Afghanistan. The task is not complete in Afghanistan but courageous actions have already been taken in spite of current dilemmas and lapses.

Following the tragedy of 9/11, huge scandals and blatant fraudulent activities were discovered at Enron and Worldcom, two major clients of the Arthur Andersen accounting firm. Within a few months, close to 200 billion-dollar paper value of these firms, for which stock holders had paid dearly and employees had invested their retirement dreams in them, virtually evaporated. Arthur Andersen’s partners panicked and shredded a good part of the evidence. The latter more than the frauds themselves led to the quick demise of this highly prized consulting and audit firm as well (Toffler and Reingold, 2003). As if these events were not enough to shake the confidence of Americans, scandals in the Catholic Church also made headlines as numerous lawsuits were filed by victims of sexual assault at the hands of priests. As Americans asked themselves, “what is happening to us? Are these terrorist, corporate, and religious breaches isolated cases or are there deeper societal problems that we must address collectively?” the war in Iraq ensued. As of this writing, it is a work in progress that will require a separate paper and many pages to be able to begin to scratch the surface of that problem (Kaplan and Kristol, 2003). Hundreds of American service men and thousands of Iraqis have been killed in this conflict with billions of dollars in property damage including looting of the historical treasures. The outcome is still uncertain.

The country at the crossroads
The scale of the terrorist acts, the political and corporate scandals, and the disillusionment of the last two decades are unprecedented in the history of this country as well as the world, and must lead us to ask ourselves some serious questions: what are the historical precedents? What is the relationship between ethical breaches and economic misfortune? How did terrorist networks nurture fear and hatred on such a grand scale? What allowed the scandals to become so large and how did these scandals come to surface? How could CEOs, CFOs and rich partners in these huge international firms risk it all for the sake of a few more millions of dollars? What actions have been taken to address these problems? Is there a way to prevent rather than detect and expose these threats? Are the actions we have taken really adequate in addressing the serious problems of our time inclusive of recent congressional actions and major reshufflings in the Securities and Exchange Commission. What needs to be done differently? What does the future hold for humanity domestically and all across the globe? Given that the future is uncertain, what can we do to learn from our mistakes rather than repeat the mistakes of the past?

A historical perspective – a philosophical review
Freedom does not come easily and throughout the centuries, obtaining freedom has entailed serious costs as well as benefits. Some argue that the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in Germany during the fifteenth century, which brought with it many of the inventions, superb writings, and dissemination of ideas that nurtured the development of scientists such as Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, and Albert Einstein, also facilitated the ideas of Karl Marx, Communism, and the phenomenon of Hitler and Mussolini (Kaplan and Kristol, 2000). Without it, the reformation and the advent of Luther may not have happened. The same explosion of ideas that fostered freedom of thought and action had serious negative consequences for the Europeans. In the next
100 years, over one-third of Europeans were slaughtered in the religious and nationalist wars that ensued.

Such explosion in writing and in dissemination of thought resulted in unprecedented advance of science, philosophy, and literature in the ensuing centuries, among whom the names of Locke, Espinosa, Voltaire, Russo, Kant, and Nietzsche come to mind in the area of philosophy, Shakespeare, of course, in the area of literature, and Newton, Bacon, Babbage, Darwin, Einstein, Freud, and hundreds more in the area of science. Yet some argue[1] that the initial phase of Renaissance which gave birth to the astonishing accomplishments of artists such as Michael Angelo, Leonardo Di Vinci, and Raphael were in fact during the authoritarian rule of the Catholic Church when deviations in thought from the “truth” were not allowed. These artists were devoted to God and the Catholic Church, and their superb works were an extension of their devotion to the supreme spirit. When that discipline was sacrificed, the realm of thought, experience, music, philosophy, literature, and science flourished, but we could never produce another Angelo, Di Vinci or Raphael. The art and literature, Lord Kenneth Clarke argues, were corrupted through Cubism and other forms of art which are free flowing but lack a sense of discipline, devotion, and order. And while the beauty and serenity of the medieval music is being discovered and appreciated, the disciplined classical music flourished through the eighteenth century through the works of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, and Schubert are no longer mainstream and has been losing ground ever since. Tradition and religious discipline was replaced with a vacuum, and that vacuum was filled for millions with the worship of money, sex, power, domination, exploitation, greed, and aggression – opinions often viewed as gospel of the times which has included colonialism, imperialism, Communism, fascism, and Nazism that flourished and met their deaths taking with them millions of innocent victims. Today, we are struggling with the excesses of capitalism, secularism, and religious fanaticism, each of which acts as a force that can radicalize the weak-minded or weak-willed who then destabilize the world despite the efforts of the majority who want to live and lead normal lives.

**Alan Bloom and his vision of the crisis**

Alan Bloom (1988) struggled with this notion of freedom and where we are with it with regard to the young generation – particularly the university students. He argued that:

> With the information explosion, tradition has become superfluous. As soon as tradition has come to be recognized as tradition, it is dead . . . Fathers and mothers have lost the idea that the highest aspiration they might have for their children is for them to be wise . . . Specialized competence and success are all that they can imagine (p. 58).

He further observes that:

> Television enters not only the room, but also the tastes of old and young alike, appealing to the immediately pleasant and subverting whatever does not conform to it. Nietzsche said the newspaper had replaced the prayer in the life of the modern bourgeois, meaning that the busy, the cheap, the ephemeral, had usurped all that remained of the eternal in his daily life (p. 59).

Bloom goes on to expound on his argument claiming that:

> The moral education that is today supposed to be the great responsibility of the family cannot exist if it cannot present to the imagination of the young a vision of a moral cosmos and of the
rewards and punishments for good and evil . . . Parents do not know what they believe, and surely do not have the self-confidence to tell their children much more than that they want them to be happy and fulfill whatever potential they may have, values are such palid things (p. 60).

He also laments the lack of emphasis in our educational system in delving deeply into philosophical thoughts and the latent meanings in the works of greats such as, William Shakespeare, and thus:

Deprived of literary guidance, they no longer have an image of a perfect soul, and hence do not long to have one. They do not even imagine that there is such a thing (p. 67).

Bloom also laments the loss of appreciation for sublime music:

University students had some early emotive association with Beethoven, Chopin, and Brahms, which was a permanent part of their makeup and to which they were likely to respond throughout their lives (p. 69).

He further argues that most of the pop music:

Has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire – not love, not eros, but sexual desire, undeveloped and untutored . . . (p. 73).

The result is nothing less than parents’ loss of control over their children’s moral education at a time when no one else is seriously concerned with it (p. 76).

He is equally concerned about the prevalent, unbridled individualism which:

Has been reinforced by another unintended and unexpected development, the decline of the family, which was the intermediary between individual and society . . . that gave men and women unqualified concern for at least some others and created an entirely different relation to society from that which the isolated individual has (p. 86).

Bloom considers the fate of man to be in a:

Tension between freedom and attachment, and attempts to achieve the impossible union of the two, are the permanent condition of man. But in modern political regimes, where rights precede duties, freedom definitely has primacy over community, family and even nature (p. 113).

Rousseau . . . found that the critical connection between man and woman was being broken by individualism, and focused his efforts, theoretical and practical, on encouraging passionate romantic love in them (p. 116).

With unbridled individualism, he observes that:

Everyone loves himself most but wants others to love him more than they love themselves . . . . The original selfishness of the state of nature remains, where concern for the common good is hypocritical, and where morality seems to be squarely on the side of selfishness (p. 118).

He is saddened to see that students are less interested in a serious study of philosophy and literature, perhaps, because:

They are less eager to look into the meaning of their lives, or to risk shaking their received opinions. In order to live with the chaos of their experience, they tend to have rigid
frameworks about what is right and wrong and how they ought to live . . . All this is a thin veneer over boundless seas of rage, doubt and fear (p. 120).

He sees the disintegration of the family, the loss of the moral campus, the unbridled search for freedom whatever it takes, and the desire for ultimate self gratification as America’s most urgent social problem:

This separation from places, persons, and beliefs, produces the psychic state of nature where reserve and timidity are the prevailing dispositions (p. 118).

All of this are seen as “the symbols of the intellectual-political problems of our time” (p. 121).

Bloom then turns into the question of sex and love. He articulately states that:

Puberty does not provide man, as it does other animals, with all that he needs to leave behind others of his kind. This means that the animal part of sexuality is intertwined in the most complex way with the higher reaches of his soul, which must inform the desires with its insight, and that the most delicate part of education is to keep the two in harmony (p. 134).

He laments the absence of romance and longing the way it used to be:

The student who made fun of playing the guitar under a girl’s window will never read or write poetry under her influence. His defective eros cannot provide his soul with images of the beautiful, and it will remain coarse and slack. It is not that he will fail to adorn or idealize the world; it is that he will not see what is there (p. 135).

Bloom argues that in modern democracies, anything goes. We are not after what is right and what is wrong any more. We are treading on fads, and what is under our feet is a shifting sand that throws us to highs and lows:

Nobody really believes in anything any more, and everyone spends his life in frenzied work and frenzied play so as not to face the fact, not to look into the abyss (p. 143).

He contends that with Freudism, we are further liberated to delve deeper and deeper into the dark side of the mind and seek further liberation from any constraints that may be holding us back (p. 156). He later delves into the theories and philosophies of John Locke, Descartes, and Freud and argues that the thinking was shifting from the world of absolute and definite right and wrong to that of selfish and brutish ego, personal satisfaction, and a progressive dismantling of the soul:

The psychology of the self has succeeded so well that it is now the instinct of most of us to turn for a cure for our ills within ourselves rather than to the nature of things (p. 179).

Bloom then delves into the question of culture and states that:

Culture is a synthesis of reason and religion, attempting to hide the sharp distinction between the two poles. Nietzsche examines the patient [and] observes that the treatment was not successful, and pronounces God dead. Now there cannot be religion; but inasmuch as man needs culture, the religious impulse remains. No religion but religiosity (p. 197).

He contends that we are in this transition point – craving for religion but suitting it to our purposes creatively:

Nihilism is a dangerous but a necessary and a possibly salutary stage in human history. In it man faces his true situation. It can break him, reduce him to despair and spiritual or bodily suicide. But it can hearten him to a reconstruction of a world of meaning. Nietzsche’s works
are a glorious exhibition of the soul of a man who might, if anybody can, be called creative. They constitute the profoundest statement about creativity, by a man who had a burning need to understand it (p. 198).

Bloom states that the:

Authentic values are those by which a life can be lived, which can form a people that produces great deeds and thoughts. Moses, Jesus, Homer, Buddha: these are the creators, the men who formed horizons; the founders of Jewish, Christian, Greek, Chinese, and Japanese culture . . . . A value is a value if it is life preserving and life-enhancing.

He contends that:

Authentic religion was gradually banished and gave its place to various dogma and churches run by charismatic leaders with their own interpretations, or still another interpretation of the enlightenment was to banish religion to something of the dark or middle ages and replace it with science and rational thinking – assuming that we as humans can mold the truth in our own way to our own liking (p. 215).

He contends that:

Our condition of doubt makes us aware of alternatives but has not until recently given us the means to resolve our doubts about the primacy of any of the alternatives. A serious life is being fully aware of the alternatives, thinking about them with all the intensity one brings to bear on life-and-death questions, in full recognition that every choice is a great risk with necessary consequences that are hard to bear (p. 227).

In the final analysis, it is perhaps this urge or yearning for perfection and conquering nature that drives us and pulls us in various directions. It is the yearning for perfection in an imperfect world and dealing with the nature of human which is fallible and imperfect. Although the longing is there; the beauty and sublimity of that perfect balance seems to be within reach, but is seldom or never truly attained. Bloom suggests that:

Man is not a problem-solving being (at all times) . . . but a problem-recognizing and – accepting being (p. 229).

He further notes that this question of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness is often-times translated into the idea of life, liberty, and pursuit of property, and sex for as much as the self desires, and in the absence of totally responsible (and perfect) being, it could become a close-to-impossible task (p. 233). On balance, we seem to have been driven to the edge of a cliff. With amazing self-restraint, leadership, good thoughts, and good will, we may be able to navigate this perilous path to higher grounds. Without it, we can easily put ourselves on the path of self (and global) destruction.

Democracy – at what cost?

Democracy, therefore, particularly when coupled with capitalism, has its consequences – although the alternative could be a lot worse at this stage of human development. Europe stagnated in thought and spirit for over 1,000 years under the harsh rule of the Catholic Church. And secular authoritarian regimes that followed produced the likes of Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Pol Pot, Iddi Amin, Melosovich, and Saddam Hussein who led millions of people to death in the past couple of centuries, or the fairly recent theocracy in Iran (and the almost defeated Talibans in Afghanistan) or the
Wahabis in Saudi Arabia who claim to have a conduit to God and religion, and thus, stone women to death on charges of adultery, cut peoples hands and feet on charges of stealing, or execute people with the clear charge of corruption claiming that the victim’s thoughts are not in accordance with God’s will! Democracy, in comparison, is very inefficient. To a certain extent, anything goes; because in the absence of an authoritative God, religion, or guide, masses are not forced to study issues and ethical questions in depth. In a democracy, citizens decide (and vote if they so choose) not necessarily on the basis of logic, but instead based on how they feel or perhaps, how they think, or most probably how the media manipulates them to think; no one can tell people why they feel the way they feel, or why they think, the way they think. At best, we are satisfied with Voltaire’s counsel saying:

I may disagree with you but defend your rights to death for saying it.

Lord Kenneth Clark laments in his thoughtful video series that the great works of the architects, painters, and sculptors sanctioned, authorized, and supported by the Church during the fifteenth century were produced by men who believed totally and absolutely and created those almost perfect images with a level of faith, devotion, and spirituality that we have not seen in mankind since then[2]. Relentless pursuit of money without regard to what happens to others along the path to “my” success, also has its costs both domestically and globally. At the end, we may end up (at least, some of us) with pockets full of cash and shiny skyscrapers, but we may also have to continue bombing towns and cities and villages as we have done in the last 100 years relentlessly. Our success will leave us hollow, cruel, and unfulfilled. Our failure would appear as a sign of weakness and lack of determination. We may have to struggle seriously and compassionately and before it is too late for answers and for formulas which we may not have been clearly discovered as of yet.

Bloom quotes Tocqueville, a Frenchman, who wrote about the earlier years of the American Republic with an admiring and critical look. He noted that:

Americans talked very much about individual rights but that there was a real monotony of thought and that vigorous independence of mind was rare. Even those who appear to be free-thinkers really look to a constituency and expect one day to be part of a majority. They are creatures of public opinion as much as are conformists (p. 247).

He concludes that perhaps the peak of the Enlightenment’s success (freedom of thought, ability to choose, road to reason, challenge, and argument) was also the beginning of its decay (p. 261) because no one was held above reason. Human beings are fallible and see double. Democracy, then, can be manipulated by charlatans, manipulators, and power grabbers, and in the process, those that the system is supposed to protect would be short-changed, manipulated, and left in cold, most often, without the victims realizing who hit them or how they were hit. The result, then, is growing disillusionment and disenfranchisement that spells death for the democracy. We are seeing the results of this disillusionment now. Even among the youth who are traditionally the most idealistic. Universities, Bloom laments, have lost their campus. Students and faculty try to compromise, to fit, to be accepted, and acceptable through shortcuts. He wishes for a resurrection of the Greek approach to philosophy and pursuit of knowledge through persistent reasoning, logic, unhindered debates, soul searching, and discovery. Knowing that the most people fear about is death and
distinction, he defines the task of philosophy as “learning how to die.” Because if we learn about death, then, we also learn about life and right living (p. 277).

**Conclusion**

Humanity, therefore, is work in progress. Much has been achieved in the past 500 years. Very few would choose to go back to those horrible years of witch hunts, crusades, inquisitions, absolute obedience to a single and cruel authority, and daily execution of undesirables, but if our faith in our own political, economic, and ethical systems continues to erode, that may be where we are heading. Unless we realize this fatal flaw and address it seriously and globally, our ship may not reach her destination, and we may sink collectively in the process. The SEC rulings, the Congress’s pontifications, the fining and jailing of perpetrators, and even the impeachment of presidents do not yet address the fundamental problem of our age – the vehicles needed for the elevation of the soul of every man, woman, and child across the globe. We need to have people that we can rely upon and we need to be those people. But how can we free the human mind from prejudice, superstition, dogmas, separations, and religious isolation and fundamentalism while maintaining democracy, free enterprise as well as our essential freedoms? Perhaps, we are at the edge of a breakthrough in realizing the fundamentally spiritual and universal nature of man that yearns for goodness and may still be able to reach it and with it, the problem of huge scandals and ruinous wars may be solved.

That vehicle may be the need to reinforce a common set of virtues and values that can elevate the humankind (Popov, 1997), and can help this nation lead the world to the level of a global and humane civilization. Linda Popov, the author of the above referenced book, is one individual who is sincerely searching for common global values that can help elevate humanity to a new level of understanding, compassion, and service. Robert Muller, the assistant to the Secretary General of the United Nations a couple of decades ago, was also in search of the basics of global education which cuts across all cultures and all religions and reinforces from childhood the essential human and spiritual virtues and verities (Freudberg, 1983). In spite of the flaws in how things are done, actions taken in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan by the global community, a level of determination and humanity (in spite of the horrors of terrorism and war) on the part of this nation and others that we can reinforce in ourselves, in our children, may help lead the world in the direction that all peace and freedom loving people wish it to take. Core virtues of this style of leadership are the virtues of compassion, decency, selflessness, and determination. We can make the world both a safer place and a happier place if we can continue to bind together in this important and universal cause. It is in our best interest, but more importantly, it is to the best interest of humankind (Schulz, 2002).

Rumi, the thirteenth century Persian poet and most admired philosopher, searched for a God within every human being and cautioned human-beings about each and every one of their endeavors in these most prophetic words:

How shall a man know God? – (this can also be translated into perfection if you so choose).
Not by senses, for He is immaterial; not by intellect, for he is unthinkable; not by philosophy, for it sees double; but rather through the window of his soul – when he succeeds in self-purification; through prayers, service, and godly living.
Come to think of it, it is the beauty of life to be imperfect, but with awareness working toward perfection, no matter how unreachable and how distant that goal may be! “Am I more complete than I were yesterday?” is the question that I must constantly ask myself for every single day that I have the privilege of living. In the process, I have to watch my every step. Otherwise, I am bound to fall flat on my face:

We may be seeing the beginnings of the reintegration of our culture, a new possibility of the unity of consciousness. If so, it will not be on the basis of any new orthodoxy, either religious or scientific. Such a new integration will be based on the rejection of all univocal understandings of reality, of all identifications of one conception of reality with reality itself. It will recognize the multiplicity of the human spirit, and the necessity to translate constantly between different scientific and imaginative vocabularies. It will recognize the human proclivity to fall comfortably into some single literal interpretation of the world and therefore the necessity to be continuously open to rebirth in a new heaven and a new earth. It will recognize that in both scientific and religious cultures all we have finally are symbols, but that there is an enormous difference between the dead letter and the living word (Robert Bellah, Beyond Belief).

It is increasingly apparent that this unity, this quest for ethical self-improvement, even virtue itself is less an esoteric concern than a deeply practical one. As the events of the past century have shown, our national security, our economic well-being, and relationships with the people of other nations hinge upon it. It is time that we adopt what philosopher Martin Buber labeled the “I-thou relationship” as if our survival depends upon it. It has become clear that it does.

Notes
1. See for example, Lord Kenneth Clark’s discussion of Civilization in a video series, Part IV – “Man – The Measure of All Things”.

References