

A Troubling Glimpse into the Future

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Every fall and spring, one can step into the ballrooms at the Santa Clara Marriott and find several hundred of Northern California's best high schoolers enthusiastically speaking on topics such as illegal immigration and economic equality. These are not your notoriously apathetic youths who can't be bothered to look beyond their iPod playlists at the world around them. With conference themes like "America at the Crossroads," and "Asking Questions, Seeking Answers," and the motto "Democracy is not a spectator sport," one expects that students in the Junior State of America, JSA, would want to be involved in the government of their country. Of course, as minors, they do not yet have the vote. However, that does not stop them from gathering with other like-minded students to discuss important issues. Well, now isn't that nice, you say, how encouraging it is to see the leaders of tomorrow starting early. After all, these students will become voters in a few years, and it is best that they be informed and educated voters, right?

I first became involved with JSA as a student at Lowell High School. Back then, JSA was mostly known as a club that gave you an excuse to stay overnight at a nice hotel with your friends (and away from your parents' supervision) twice a year, all the while masquerading as a concerned citizen. I say mostly, because there was a small group of students who really did care about debating issues such as affirmative action and abortion. As one of the few Christians in a liberal club at a very liberal school, in an even more liberal city, I often struggled with my pride and desire to fit in when trying to decide whether or not to speak up. I knew that my opinions were not popular, but the times I did overcome my fear, I had an audience that listened and even nominated me for Best Speaker. When I graduated, I was thankful for the chance that JSA provided to see the "other side," as well as the opportunity to articulate the Christian worldview; however, I didn't think I'd have any further involvement with an essentially high school level organization.

Fast forward to this last year: fresh out of college, I began teaching at a private Christian high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. The school's debate team was participating in JSA for the first time, and I went along

rather apprehensively as a teacher advisor. I steeled myself for the drunken parties and general raucous misbehavior that I remembered, but I also hoped that my students would have a worthwhile experience. While I was pleasantly surprised by the lack of illegal behavior (the head of the JSA happily reported that no one was sent home), I was shocked at the otherwise poor conduct of many of the students.

To put all of this into the proper context, I should explain the party system of JSA. Instead of the Democratic, Republican, Green, etc. parties, which are deemed to be too charged with connotations, JSA has the Radical, Liberal, Moderate, and Conservative parties which cover the political spectrum from the far left to right. For the thousand or so students who attended the last Winter Congress at the state capital, this was the approximate breakdown of student affiliations: about 500 students identified with the Radical Party (For progress towards anarchy — because the Liberal Party doesn't dare), about 300 students sided with the Liberal Party (Progress, freedom, equality, tolerance, and all that jazz), 170 students called themselves Moderate (Keeping everybody happy by waffling on all controversial issues), and the remaining 30 students made up the Conservative Party (We all go to Christian schools). Needless to say, my students were in that last group. While I'm not surprised (this is California we live in, after all, and these students are supposed to be representative of the general population), these ratios still sadden and scare me. The numbers though, are the least of it.

Debates on controversial topics—abortion, homosexual marriage, prostitution, drug use, and drinking age—were well-attended when I was a student, and certainly I expected the same five years later. However, I was taken aback by the change in both the speakers' arguments and the audience's etiquette.

It used to be that the liberal speakers had statistics and research to back up their points; they would bring up data "proving" that legalizing prostitution would strengthen the economy as a reason to support their position. And the conservatives, who were mostly Christians, would trot out Bible verses. The opposition would then reason that some minority's beliefs were not

an appropriate basis for making laws governing the entire country. But at least they took the time to listen and respond.

Contrast that to the last convention I attended as a teacher-advisor: now it is the conservative side that is supporting its pro-life stance with statistics on post-abortion trauma. You'd think that better arguments would lead to a more careful consideration on the part of the audience regarding the points presented, but this was not the case. Any conservative speaker who went up to the podium was booed, catcalled, laughed at, cursed, and at best, ignored. The immaturity displayed by the audience was so appalling that first the moderators, and then the student governor and her aides were reduced to yelling, cajoling, and pleading with the audience to "please, respect the speaker!" Such mouthing off sessions posing as debates between educated people provided a frightening glimpse into the mob mentality present in the political left. Perhaps the most chilling, though, were the arguments presented by the radicals.

As the biggest group at JSA, the radicals have largest pool of students to draw from; hence, almost all the radical speakers were dynamic, charismatic, and eloquent orators. With such talent on their side, one would expect their arguments to be equally strong. This was decidedly not the case. Their reasoning for everything, from legalizing prostitution and marijuana to lowering drinking age and age of consent, was "if we feel like doing it, we should be able to!" In their minds, sex with anyone and anything and an altered state of mind are no longer morally questionable, they are now rights and anyone who desires such should be able to engage in them legally. And in case that line of reasoning wasn't convincing enough, cursing profusely throughout should somehow help further the argument.

At the end of the school year, the JSA legislative track record stands thus: Prostitution, marijuana, euthanasia, and homosexual marriage should be legal. Minors should not need parental consent for an abortion. The US military should stop sticking its nose into other countries' business, and the money saved there should all go toward alternative fuel research. Bush should be impeached. The phrases "under God" and "in God we trust," as well as the Ten Commandments, should be removed from all state-sponsored activities, literature, currency, buildings, and pretty much everything else. Prayer and teaching intelligent design in schools, the electoral college, and capital punishment should be banned. Basically, all of the political left's pet issues

were resolved to their liking. The only part of their agenda that didn't work out in their favor was affirmative action for college admissions and hiring. Why that issue, you ask? Call this a wild shot in the dark, but I think it's because most students at JSA are white, upper middle class.

I have to give a lot of credit to my students — in the face of such opposition, they nevertheless did their research and presented rational arguments for things that would seem like common sense. No one listened to them, of course, but they left each convention feeling energized and inspired to come up with even better speeches, in hopes of reaching at least one person in the mob. In that aspect, at least, I feel somewhat assured; there are still some Christians in the next generation of leaders who are willing to be the unpopular minority. Unfortunately, that minority is extremely small. There were several dozen schools represented, but only three Christian schools. Investigation reveals that most Christian schools participate in more prestigious Christian debate leagues. While I applaud their striving for lofty academic heights, I can't help but think that places like JSA could use some salt and light.

But the issue remains that the majority of today's young people have been brainwashed by the liberal left into thinking that anything they want, they should get. And that's frightening, because anything includes, well, anything. The lack of self-discipline and the obscuration of the boundaries between decency and everything else do not bode well for the future of America. The members of the audience, speakers, and student organizers in the Junior State of America will one day be the voters, lawmakers, and leaders in the United States of America. If what I saw at these conventions is indicative of the general sentiment among high school students, we may soon be facing a crisis greater than terrorists, global warming, and the avian flu.

"Democracy is not a spectator sport," proclaims the JSA webpage. It is an excellent reminder for all of us that Biblical principles are not upheld by merely smearing ash on our foreheads and lamenting loudly. If we've been waiting for something that hits close enough to home to stir us to action, this is it. Or if that's not explicit enough, in the words of British philosopher Edmund Burke, "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

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