The Book of Virtues

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by Leonard Fein

The usual battle-lines are being manned; here comes another debilitating screaming match. On the one side, Senator Dole and William Bennett, author of *The Book of Virtues* on the other, the ACLU, the people at Time Warner, Oliver Stone, et al.

Let's walk that one through more slowly: On the one side, a presidential candidate who seeks to shore up his support from the conservative wing of his party, and a stern moralizer who comes by his convictions honestly; on the other, defenders of the First Amendment, profiteers, a producer who, given his hyperbolic way of perceiving the world, cannot be taken seriously.

With such a mixed cast of characters, it might seem that the rest of us would be given pause. Which side should we take in the debate over gangsta rap and other despicable instances of the corruption of our culture?

For many of us, Mr. Dole's obvious hypocrisy and our own commitment to the First Amendment will be more than sufficient to settle the argument. Down with censorship! Down with government intrusion! Let the creative spirit breathe free! Remember, Galileo was excommunicated, Spinoza too. Beware the cultural neanderthals, let a hundred flowers bloom, and if one or two look suspiciously like weeds, well, that's just the price we have to pay for freedom.

We will therefore be inclined to agree to what has emerged as the music industry's and Hollywood's first line of defense: Who is Robert Dole to be telling us how to behave? As Norman Lear, a person especially concerned with matters moral, observes, "Hollywood in its

presentation of violence and sex has no more to answer for than the Congress of the United States. The name of the game in the entertainment business is short-term profit. This is exactly what Congress is all about - how can we get re-elected in the short term and every other value be damned." Or with Oliver Stone's more pointed indictment: "It's the height of hypocrisy for Senator Dole, who wants to repeal the assault weapons ban, to blame Hollywood for the violence in our society. Hollywood did not create the problem of violence in America."

And in fact, Mr. Dole's emergence as a Hollywood basher is, as *The New York Times* observes editorially, a case of "pandering to the right. . . It is hypocritical for him to attack violent movies and lyrics while ignoring or condoning the ever-increasing availability of guns."

But the argument is not thereby resolved. Mr. Stone may be right when he says that the entertainment industry did not create the problem of violence. But that does not mean (by a long shot) that the entertainment industry has refrained from exploiting the problem and exacerbating it. Mr. Lear may be right that Congress is no better than the entertainment industry as an example of commitment to high-minded values. But if Mr. Lear thinks Congress is as shabby as evidently he does, and that the music industry is no better, why not direct the same kind of effort toward the industry so many of us invest in upgrading Congress?

No, the traditional stereotypic understanding of the dispute - neanderthals vs. sophisticates, censorship vs. the First Amendment - doesn't work. The reason it doesn't work is that the gansta rap that Time Warner pushes on the society is truly garbage. It pollutes the environment, it is no better than toxic waste, it is every bit as vile and degrading as its most vehement critics say. And while those of us whose first and foremost concern is with the defense of the First Amendment may win the skirmish, we will have done nothing to solve the problem.

Mr. Dole's insists that his "is not a call for censorship" but "for good citizenship." From

this we may take comfort, but not much, for there is no more reason to believe in the sincerity of his commitment to free speech than there is in the sincerity of his assault. We may take somewhat more comfort from the words of William Bennett and C. DeLores Tucker (she's chairman of the National Political Congress of Black Women), who write that "We are not calling for censorship. We are both virtual absolutists on the First Amendment. Our appeal is to a sense of corporate responsibility and simple decency."

Comfort aside - that's not what the shouting's about, after all - the issue comes down to this: First, we oppose government intrusion on the arts, even if the arts include things utterly without redeeming social value. (Kiddie porn is an exception, and there may be a very few others.) Second, the problem of gansta rap at least, and perhaps also of mindless violence in film, is real. We do not need more research to tell us that gangsta rap lyrics have no place in society, and we ought actively to oppose their promotion.

If you put those two propositions together, you're left with the following: We, rather than agencies of government, ought to take some control here. We do that by complaining to the producers, by complaining to the sponsors, by appealing to their own sense of decency ("Would you want your daughter to listen to one?"), and, the effort failing, we move to boycott. The civic society belongs, after all, to us, and with our ownership of it comes responsibility for its health.

And yes, of course, there are dangers in boycotts, too. Today gansta rap, tomorrow *Catcher in the Rye*. But it need not come to that, not if we shake of our fear of being associated with the know-nothings, not if we refuse to concede a perfectly valid concern to the would©be censors of the right. This is our battle, too, or should be.