

2008

## In My View

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### Recommended Citation

Hone, Tom and Norwitz, Jeffrey H. (2008) "In My View," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 61 : No. 4 , Article 24.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol61/iss4/24>

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## IN MY VIEW

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### AN END TO UNPLEASANT BEHAVIORS

Sir:

In his brief review of Diana West's *The Death of the Grown-Up: How America's Arrested Development Is Bringing Down Western Civilization* (Spring 2008, pp. 138–39), Professor Jeffrey H. Norwitz of the Naval War College failed to alert readers to the controversial nature of West's argument. West's position is that one factor—the lack of self-discipline—is the basic cause of the decline of American influence in the world. Now, according to West, the United States lacks the ability to deal effectively with attacks on it and on its allies by organizations (al Qaeda and related terrorist groups) that do in fact have a sense of self-discipline and shared commitment. For that reason, *The Death of the Grown-Up* calls for an end to what Professor Norwitz calls “decades of immature behavior.”

The weakness of Diana West's argument is that it attributes a wide range of unpleasant behaviors and unsuccessful government policies to one single factor—the “death” of the ideal of the adult as a responsible, self-disciplined, and self-sacrificing individual. This intense focus on one cause of social decline and moral decay is echoed, ironically enough, by Osama bin Laden and his allies. The western world, according to bin Laden and al Qaeda, lacks discipline and order. The West, especially the United States, poses a direct threat to Muslims everywhere because the West attacks the order present in Islam directly, through the occupation of Muslim lands, and indirectly, through modern media, through modern ideas about the role of women in society and the family, and through systems of education that denigrate religion and respect for traditional wisdom.

Diana West and bin Laden might seem strange intellectual companions, but they have famous (or infamous, as the case may be) company—Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, to name just two intellectuals who made the mistake of ascribing the ills of the world to a single factor. In the case of Marx, the single factor

was the means of production and distribution. For Freud, it was the great inner tension between the desires of the individual psyche and the demands of an ordered society. Like Ms. West, both Marx and Freud pointed to a factor that mattered. But also like her, Marx and Freud laid too much responsibility at the feet of one variable or cause of behavior.

If serious studies of contemporary societies have shown anything, it is that most individual behavior within a society, its institutions, and its organizations is shaped by many factors that interact with one another. We are not beings driven only by our economic environment or by our psychological desires or by the ways we have been raised. We are interesting, puzzling, and frustrating creatures because our behavior is often difficult to predict and because it is often impossible to show that how our societies fare is the result of some one behavior or psychological factor.

Just as bin Laden's view of the world is flawed, so is West's. But does that mean neither should be read? Absolutely not. Yet it's important to note that *all* single-factor explanations for social or political behavior should be evaluated with great caution. I can't think of one that has proven correct or has been shown to be the one and only key to understanding the complexities of human social, economic, and political behavior. Consequently, we should beware of embracing *any* single-factor explanation for present or past events, no matter how much that explanation appeals to us.

TOM HONE

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*Professor Norwitz replies:*

In criticizing my book review of Diana West's *The Death of the Grown-Up: How America's Arrested Development Is Bringing Down Western Civilization* (*Naval War College Review*, Spring 2008, pp. 138–39), Professor Tom Hone missed the point of both and, in doing so, misrepresented West's book as a simplistically narrow homily on what ails society. He could not be more mistaken.

Professor Hone erroneously decries West for isolating a "single factor" responsible for her warning about western civilization's decline. Were that true, then his objection would be justified. However, saying that West and Osama bin

Laden are “intellectual companions” is indefensible and shocking, given West’s reputation as a voice for a muscular approach to radical Islam. The fact of the matter is that West drives deeply into the erosion of personal, family, and societal values with astute analysis and convincing evidence that *many factors* are responsible. Even a cursory read of the book discloses that the author examines post–World War II attitudes, business strategy to celebrate youth, print media, music and movie industries, and even the law as separate factors. And it is an easy step to the realization that each of these elements has multiple root causes.

West yearns for societal maturity evidenced by sound decision-making principles, proven core values, critical analysis, lessons learned, embrace of history, reevaluation based on success and failure, movement past self-gratification to selfless service, and acceptance that complex problems require complex solutions. Is the book controversial? Only to those who sense West’s rapier-like finger poking them in the chest.

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