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Harvey Mansfield — 2007 Jefferson Lecturer

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Harvey Mansfield, William R. Kenan Professor of Government at [Harvard University](#), delivered the 2007 [Jefferson Lecture](#) at the Warner Theater in Washington last night. The Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities is one of the nation's highest honors, and Professor Mansfield is most deserving of the recognition.

Mansfield is a leading political scientist, and the son of a political scientist. But, beyond that, he is a keen observer of the culture — a scholar who combines unassailable classical knowledge with keen contemporary insights.

Commentary on his lecture from last night will have to wait. In the meantime, consider these excerpts from his writings:

From *Manliness* (2006):

Our judgment on manliness has to take its bearings from the dangers it poses on both extremes, too little and too much. If you keep your eye only on one extreme, you back unawares into the other. The modern philosophers behind the project of rational control were mainly afraid of thumos and its incitements to idealism; they laid the ground for a dull, bourgeois society lacking in both love and ambition. Nietzsche, in revulsion against this uninteresting landscape, released manliness from all restraint except the self-restraint needed to strengthen one's self. Of course those who followed him forgot what was noble and embraced what was brutal. Yet our situation is not so different from the one faced by the classical philosophers. True, our extremes are more extreme than in their time. We are, or we claim to be, more rational than they, and at the same time the history of our totalitarian regimes shows us to be more willful as well. The uncompromising reason with which we have destroyed divine authority is accompanied by the untrammelled will that has destroyed self-government and been guilty of genocide. Can it be an accident that the first atheist regimes in human history were the first totalitarian regimes? Still, our experience only confirms the conclusions of Plato and Aristotle on manliness that the true way is in the middle between too much and too little. In this general strategy they can be our guide.

From "[A Nation of Consenting Adults](#)," *The Weekly Standard* (1998):

So there is a general tendency in our liberal politics to privatize the issues, to remove them from public argument. Not to make an issue of something is just what toleration means. But toleration has a general tendency too, that goes from withholding punishment while disapproving to giving approval after forsaking censure — from frown to smile. The president's strong job-approval rating is distinct from his moral standing, but in a sense they are together precisely because of the difference. Job approval has been drained of its moral content with regard to sex and diminished as to lying. Toleration is not neutral. Whatever is tolerated in our politics tends to gain ground as the exercise of a right. If we don't keep up the standard of morality we will bring it down. Already those who defend the president have felt obliged to demean and defame other presidents to make their false point that everybody does it. . . .

Taking sex out of politics will not focus more attention on the issues. In the first place, it is impossible to remove shame from sex. Never mind why, but the consequence is that sex will always be interesting: Count on that. It will particularly interest the sixties generation, and those of their successors for whom sexual liberation goes with inordinate honesty in

self-expression. Those inspired by these kindred ideals are always on the lookout for lying and hypocrisy. They don't believe in truth, but they do believe in truth to oneself. Such people have a big appetite for scandal.

From "Love in the Ruins: Men, Women, and the Way We Live Now," *The Weekly Standard*(2004):

What evolutionists think is the closest we usually get to the notion of nature these days. But it is not close enough. For evolution sees everything as organized for survival and cannot recognize our better, higher nature. Thus it sees no difference in rank between the male desire for an active sex life and the male interest in being married, or between the promptings of desire and the instruction of reason. What kind of seriousness is this?

From "The Case for the Strong Executive", *The Claremont Review of Books* (2007)

"Responsibility" is not mere responsiveness to the people; it means doing what the people would want done if they were apprised of the circumstances. Responsibility requires "personal firmness" in one's character, and it enables those who love fame—"the ruling passion of the noblest minds"—to undertake "extensive and arduous enterprises." Only a strong president can be a great president. Americans are a republican people but they admire their great presidents. Those great presidents—I dare not give a complete list—are not only those who excelled in the emergency of war but those, like Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt, who also deliberately planned and executed enterprises for shaping or reshaping the entire politics of their country. This admiration for presidents extends beyond politics into society, in which Americans, as republicans, tolerate, and appreciate, an amazing amount of one-man rule. The CEO (chief executive officer) is found at the summit of every corporation including universities. I suspect that appreciation for private executives in democratic society was taught by the success of the Constitution's invention of a strong executive in republican politics.

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