

Miss Manners: Trump is Making Americans Ruder

In a [recent article in *The Atlantic*](#), Judith Martin or 'Miss Manners' insists that the reason why most people have deplorable manners is not poor upbringing, but Donald Trump.

Not only does fact imitate fiction and life imitates art. According to Miss Manners, the public imitates politicians. Martin rehearses the age-old argument that political leaders model the virtues for ordinary citizens:

"Politicians may not be full role models in the sense that no responsible parent would urge a child to be one. It is more like "You could grow up to be President— or whatever you want," with the emphasis on the latter. But statesmen have nevertheless been expected to behave themselves."

Whether it's Bill [Clinton's extramarital affairs](#) or Mark [Foley's trysts with congressional pages](#), politicians are more often touted as paragons of vice than virtue. So, Miss Manner's claim that politicians exemplify moral excellence clearly misses the mark.

Indeed, [a recent survey](#) conducted by the University of Chicago's NORC Center for Public Affairs Research reveals that 68 percent of all respondents think that politicians are far ruder than average people. A full 80 percent believe that politicians behave so poorly that we should hold them to a higher standard.

Perhaps Martin's mistake is to confuse virtue with good

manners. Virtue is excellence of character. To cultivate virtue, [Ben Franklin](#) reminds us in his *Autobiography*, is to achieve “moral perfection.” Etiquette refers to customary rules of polite behavior, like taking your hat off when you enter a church. Manners are very different standards of ‘good’ behavior.

Indeed, Miss Manners conflates virtue and etiquette. She suggests several “Alternative Virtues” that resemble none of the [cardinal virtues](#) (prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude), [theological virtues](#) (faith, hope and chastity) or [aristocratic virtues](#) (magnanimity, wisdom and courage). They are authenticity, frankness, honesty, safety, open-mindedness, assertiveness, humility, forgiveness, achievement, entertainment and acting out.

Under ‘entertainment’, she writes:

Having had eight years of a dignified president [Obama] with an exemplary family life, people are hungry for the pleasures of scandal.

Martin’s point is that Trump has singlehandedly transformed the virtues into vices through the poor example of his own rude behavior. Since a scandal in the White House is entertaining, and scandal like rudeness is well-mannered or virtuous, then we should expect a scandal on the order of Clinton’s or Foley’s. Doubtful.

Recall how in [Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*](#) Mrs. Bennet suddenly realizes that the perfectly polite Mr. Wickham is a wicked man, while the pompous and rude Mr. Darcy is a good man:

“There certainly was some mismanagement in the education of those two young men. One has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it.”

The problem with confusing etiquette and virtue is that the person with good manners then easily passes as having virtue. Conversely, a rude person is mistaken for someone with a character is rife with vice. However, this is a mistake. The bar is always higher for virtue than it is for etiquette.

I fear that Miss Manners has a long way to go before she becomes Miss Virtue.

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