

The Absence of Honor and Our Failed Governing Elites

In "[To Lucasta, On Going to the Wars](#)," Richard Lovelace (1618–1657) writes of a soldier who laments leaving the "chaste breast and quiet mind" of his mistress to embrace "a sword, a horse, a shield." But he concludes the poem with this thought:

"Yet this inconstancy is such
As thou too shalt adore;
I could not love thee, Dear, so much,
Loved I not Honour more."

Over 200 years later, Karl Maeser (1828–1901), founder of Brigham Young Academy, precursor to Brigham Young University, also spoke of honor. This quote, which comes from Brett and Kate McKay's [The Art of Manliness: Manvotionals](#), is long but deserves to be rendered in full:

"I have been asked what I mean by 'word of honor.' I will tell you. Place me behind prison walls—walls of stone ever so high, ever so thick, reaching ever so far into the ground—there is a possibility that in some way or another I might be able to escape; but stand me on the floor and draw a chalk line around me and have me give my word of honor never to cross it. Can I get out of that circle? No, never! I'd die first."

In our postmodern culture, we have retained the usage of honor in certain arenas. The recipient of an award frequently replies with some statement beginning, "I am honored..." Our nation awards the Medal of Honor to combatants who perform acts of valor, and we still find a maid or matron of honor in

the bridal party of a wedding. Though it's frequently violated these days, our service academies were once famed for their code of honor, which banned lying, cheating, and stealing, and punished violators of that trust with dismissal.

Yet honor as conceived by Lovelace and Maeser is so rarely mentioned today, particularly in regard to our public figures, that we may well wonder whether the concept still exists. In an earlier time, for example, honor impugned could result in death, as was the case in 1806 when Andrew Jackson killed Charles Dickinson [in a duel](#) sparked by aspersions cast on Jackson's honesty and on his wife, Rachel. Jackson was later elected president of the United States. Fast forward to 2022 when Will Smith slapped Chris Rock onstage at the Academy Awards for insulting his wife, and many celebrities and viewers [condemned](#) Smith's defense of her honor as beyond the pale.

Though extreme, in both cases a code of personal honor was at work.

If we search online for "[personal honor definition](#)," we find a variety of meanings, many of which include the word *integrity*, defined by my [online dictionary](#) as "the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles." Not so long ago, to be thought of as honorable was a high compliment. Even today, though we may rarely use the word, most of us know people we regard as honorable: the trustworthy mechanic, the physician who does her absolute best for her patients, the office manager who treats his employees justly and fairly.

In today's political circles, however, where we might hope for an abundance of honorable men and women, personal integrity frequently seems as dated as Jackson's dueling pistols. Integrity implies a willingness to accept blame as well as praise, yet no one in government has resigned in the wake of our disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, our [catastrophic COVID policies](#), or the ongoing chaos at our southern border.

Few have offered even halfhearted apologies for these calamities.

The ongoing revelations of the Biden family's shady financial dealings appear void of honor, other than, as the old saying goes, "honor among thieves." The [Durham Report](#) confirmed what many already knew—that the FBI, which was once the very embodiment of untarnished honor, had disgraced itself and failed to uphold both its standards and its duty to operate under the law. The 51 former intelligence officials—who, over two years ago, signed a [letter](#) claiming that the Hunter Biden laptop emails and information were a Russian ruse—lied to the American people in an effort to assist the Biden presidential campaign and so disgraced themselves.

In 2022, Republican George Santos blatantly [lied](#) about his educational and employment background to win a seat in the House of Representatives and has now [been charged](#) for those deceptions and for financial wrongdoings. But Santos is perhaps only the most flagrant case of such chicanery and falsehoods among our officials, elected and appointed. President Biden, some members of both parties in Congress, and various government bureaucrats—Dr. Fauci is a stellar example—have all engaged in deceit and distortion of the truth in the past year alone.

The consequence? [Polls](#) show that trust in government is at a near-record low among Americans.

In his 2006 book, [Honor: A History](#), James Bowman writes, "The culture of our governing elites is woefully, even fatally, inadequate to the demands that will eventually be placed upon it without some return to a sense of honor in the old-fashioned sense."

And here we are.

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