

Book Review

Decade of Denial: A Snapshot of America in the 1990s. by Herbert London.
Lexington Books. 2001. 181 pages, \$24.95

Reviewed by William B. Allen*

If you think that life in America has gone from bad to worse in the past decade and if you would find a grim pleasure in reading an elegantly acerbic description of the nation's ills, then *Decade of Denial* is the book for you. Herbert London's snapshot of America in the 1990s brings into sharp focus the consequences of the wrong turn that the nation took sometime during the 1960s. His witty account of the effects of the baby-boomer generation's "adolescent fantasies of utopia," combined with the pervasive "nihilistic relativism" of the age, depicts all too accurately the truth that we have lost our way.

If, on the other hand, you seek a substantive analysis of the factors that have contributed to our sorry state or for directions on the way out of the abyss, you must await the sequel. London, professor of humanities at New York University, cautions that his purpose is not to offer a history of the 1990s, but rather a set of anecdotal illustrations, drawn largely from his own experience and put forward in an "earnest effort to understand" those experiences. The fact that he has captured so well a portrait of the mass culture of today makes one wish for equally cogent musings on how and why its physiognomy became so shaped.

What are the prominent features in his portrait of America? While touching on nearly all aspects of contemporary culture, London focuses particularly on problems within these arenas: media, sports, education and morality. He opens with the prediction that we need not worry whether or how the airwaves will be filled once we all have access to five hundred television channels, because, he reassures us, "Everyone has an opinion, and every opinion will be expressed—on the air." Our national penchant for voicing our opinions and our lack of concern about whether those opinions are knowledgeable, shocking, base, or harmful have baneful effects. Excellence, judgment, and truth have all been sacrificed to the god of egalitarianism. By denying the existence of external standards of any type, we have also denied ourselves the opportunity of the very striving that not only creates excellence but advances humanity itself.

London conveys the calamitous effects of this denial most tellingly in his extended discussions of "lower" education (where educators have replaced academic objectives with "psychobehavioral goals") and "higher" education (where postmodernist educators pronounce that "Bugs Bunny is as valuable as Socrates"). His accounts of multiculturalism, affirmative action, cultural faddishness, the erosion of the curriculum, and many of the other ills of our educational institutions are, overall, on target.

His chapter titled "Cultural Fall-Deeper" is at once the most and least satisfying part of the book. Here he attempts more in the way of analysis and diagnosis than is

undertaken elsewhere. After lancing four wrong-headed notions that stand out among the welter of pernicious notions of the past decade, London nevertheless finds hope in his conviction that there is more “flexibility, fungibility, and adaptability on earth” than we might at first assume. Amidst the cultural and political decay of the 1990s, there is yet a prospect for rebirth and renewal. This welcome spate of thoughtful reflection both on the causes of our problems and on the potential for solutions would have worked much better were it not immediately followed by a jarring lapse to blast the image of a woman wearing a lacy dress with combat boots, lamenting the manner in which women’s fashion “conveys mixed sex cues.”

Decade of Denial proved ultimately unsatisfying to this reader as a result of its dizzying meandering from one topic to another. For example, in the short twenty-two pages of the “Cultural Fall-Deeper” chapter, London takes us on a whirlwind tour of complaints about the O.J. Simpson trial, racial double-standards, Hollywood celebrities’ propensity for adopting causes, the loss of common sense in our society, the Marxists’ search for ways to stay in business after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the impact of soft money on political parties, the lack of moral perspective in most children’s books, the lack of an historical perspective in newscasting, and the “health gestapo’s” campaigns against tobacco and fast food. I’ll stop here, although that means leaving off the last several topics of the chapter.

Decade of Denial will find a large and appreciative audience who is willing to accept the book on the terms on which its author presents it. Many readers are certain to applaud London’s decrimal of the nation’s “precipitous slide into vulgarity, greed, and all-around slackness.” Many readers will also rally to his call for the nation restore its hallmark characteristics of optimism, virtue, and a belief in merit. Nor was this often contrarian reader unmoved by his rhetoric. My wish was only that this well-crafted rhetoric were used not merely to compose a picture but also to analyze its composition.

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