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Doing the right thing in a world full of spin

As the end of the year approaches, I have been pondering the goings-on of the world in big and small ways. My outlook has been influenced by rereading large sections of Edward Gibbon's classic "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire."



Originally published in six volumes between 1776 and 1788, when our own American cultural empire was in its infancy, Gibbon presents

the history of Romans and barbarians, Christians and pagans like an old-fashioned dinner-table raconteur. Gibbon viewed history as "little more than the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind," so he would be right at home today as a chronicler of virtually anything in our daily headlines.

Gibbon's stories are delicious, in the manner of good southern writers. They are delightfully gossipy about human foibles and perceptive about human vice. I kept hearing the voice of actor Phillip Seymour Hoffman playing Truman Capote, as Gibbon time and again used just the right words to tell me something that we all know about the figures who strut and fret on life's stage. We need gifted observers such as Gibbon, Capote or Shakespeare to give voice to what we know.

Gibbon is fascinated with how human beings behave, i.e., their ethics. In all the hand-wringing these days about why everyone from business executives and politicians to ordinary folks has trouble choosing to do the right thing, what is missing is an awareness that ethics has to do with customs, manners, habits.

We do not acquire ethics in remedial seminars or self-help books. To be sure, stories like those in the Old and New Testament, Bill Bennett's "Book of Virtues," Jimmy Carter's "Our Endangered Values," or the late and much-lamented Will Wilson Sr.'s "A Fool for a Client" can point us in the right direction. They will improve our ethics if — and it's the largely missing "if" these days — our leaders at all levels (from kindergarten teachers and grade school coaches to presidents and NBA and NFL stars) and our general cultural norms validate the lessons we find in them.

Last week, some of us fathers were helping our fifth- and sixth-grade sons and daughters learn how to play basketball. We emphasized good

sportsmanship, team play, trying hard and accepting mistakes. I stressed that being honest underlay these principles of sports ethics. Within minutes, there was a close, out-of-bounds play. I called it in one team's favor. Without hesitation, a boy on that team said, "No, it went off me." I praised him for his good ethics, but I had a false feeling in my gut.

We all know that, time and again, he will see coaches and players at all levels trying to fool referees into making a wrong call in their favor. Sure enough, in the Pistons-Spurs Christmas game, the announcers used replay to show that Rasheed Wallace was trying to con the refs about a foul he had clearly made on Tim Duncan. Ethical lesson: It's OK to lie to gain advantage.

Speaking of spinning and truth-telling, here are two examples of questionable ethics on higher levels. First, our decision to wage preemptive war against Iraq and to justify it later by saying that we overthrew Saddam Hussein. My philosopher colleague Al Martinich reminds us that St. Anselm of Canterbury pointed out the error in sophistical logic of this kind when he said, "Although man was rightly tormented when tormented by the devil, the devil did not have the right to torment him."

The ethical lesson: It is a clear good that Saddam is no longer in power in Iraq. But we did not have the right, and it violates established principles of international ethics, for us to be waging war in Iraq as we are.

Finally, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales reasons that Congress granted President Bush the right to authorize secret wiretaps of U.S. citizens without independent oversight when it authorized him to use force in our open-ended war on terror. This kind of legal reasoning explains why the simple Huns, Goths and Germans held the "skill of eloquent lawyer(s)" of the Roman emperors in "contempt and abhorrence."

The ethics and twisted semantics here: It is OK to use force to violate guaranteed liberties of your own people, as long as you are free to use force against their enemies.

Gibbon saw such things again and again in his sweep of Roman imperial history. That is why he reports with obvious personal satisfaction the satisfaction of a German barbarian who permanently closed the mouth of a Roman lawyer, so that "the viper could no longer hiss."