

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Can the gentleman be saved?

by John Chang Won Yi, Yale 2002

Recently, while walking through the hectic streets of Manhattan's Times Square, I happened to pass by a seedy little establishment, marked by offensively flashing red lights and suggestively painted silhouettes of women on the awning. It was a self-proclaimed "Gentleman's Club," catering, of course, to only the finest tastes. At first, such a commonplace city sight did little to pique my interest, but then a question started to gnaw at me: What is it about strip clubs that make them fit for a 'gentleman'? And further, what exactly is a 'gentleman'?

The common dictionary definition points to politeness, adherence to etiquette, and even noble birth as the distinguishing characteristics; however, there is much more to it than merely being a pleasant fellow. A gentleman lives his life with respect—respect not only for his fellow man, but also for himself. Furthermore, a true gentleman cannot stand idly by in the face of injustice, nor can he be content with the status quo; he must always be striving to improve his society. Brothers of Sigma Chi are held to an even greater set of values; in a sense, the principles of gentlemanly conduct are inherent in "The Jordan Standard." Unfortunately, staying on the path is becoming increasingly difficult, due in large part to various societal pressures (see first-paragraph example). Thus, it is imperative that Sigma Chis, as self-proclaimed leaders of society, remain ever vigilant. We must ensure that the gentleman does not become a dying breed of man.

Surely, the concept of the gentleman has transformed a great deal in the years since the founding of Sigma Chi. Some of these changes have been rather apparent—fashion, speech, and general deportment are considerably less formal today than in the days of Isaac M. Jordan. Outside of a special occasion, rarely will one find college students clad in suits. Indeed, baseball caps have replaced derbies as daily wear, just as khakis and jeans have taken over for dress trousers. In addition, one would be hard-pressed to find men who can speak or write with the polish and flair of our Fraternity's founders; one need look no further than the antiquated eloquence of the Fraternity Ritual to be reminded of this fact. Despite these superficial changes, however, the essence of what it means to be a gentleman remains unaltered. While our taste in clothing may change with the times, our understanding of what the gentleman ought to be must remain untainted.

Unfortunately, it can be quite easy to be swayed by societal trends. The current "dumbing-down" of America, as evidenced by the prevalence—and popularity—of trashy television talk shows, invariably has an adverse effect on us all. Even those of us fortunate enough to be studying at institutions of higher learning are not immune to this phenomenon; academic standards have dropped significantly in recent decades. Illustrating this fact, social promotion in our public schools is at its worst, with ill-prepared students being allowed to graduate into a bleak world of minimal upward mobility. Similarly, society has also lowered the bar for what passes as gentlemanly conduct, condoning behavior that would have been deemed absolutely unacceptable in years past.

Much of the culpability lies with those men and women who are in the public spotlight. Celebrities, politicians, and athletes may claim that they are not role models, but by virtue of their positions, they ultimately are. Reports of professional athletes accused of spousal abuse, or even murder, are so frequent that they may hardly elicit a reaction anymore among most Americans. Fraud and corruption is almost expected from our elected officials—ironically, anything short of ruthless deception is regarded as a sign of weakness or naiveté. Of course, one must realize that celebrities, despite their fame, are essentially no different from the rest of us; they necessarily have their flaws, and it is unfair to expect perfection from them. Nevertheless, it is clearly a bad indication when a national leader—who has the implicit responsibility to be a preeminent gentleman—can be revealed to be both an adulterer and a liar. And it is an even worse sign that the people, after only a brief period of shock, can come to accept such behavior.

Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that many men have forgotten, or simply chosen to ignore, the basic principles of etiquette, or even plain decency. Even an action as trivial as the removal of one's hat while indoors—a simple sign of respect—has just about disappeared. Another particularly irking trend is that of the growing incivility in the interactions between men and women. The age-old traditions of pulling out a chair at the dinner table, or holding a door for a lady, are harder and harder to spot. While some have recently begun to contend, mistakenly, that these customs are somehow patronizing, such notions are only contributing to the gradual breakdown of the concept of the gentleman. It seems rather illogical that the simple act of helping an acquaintance, regardless of gender, can be considered so abject. It comes as no surprise, then, that some women remark that "chivalry is dead."

All of these examples serve as evidence of why it is imperative that we make doubly sure to live our lives ever keeping in mind that we are gentlemen, as well as brothers of the Sigma Chi Fraternity.

Realistically, we cannot hope to change the thoughts and actions of every man, but hopefully by setting a positive example, we can influence some. By virtue of our adherence to "The Jordan Standard"—which serves as a minimum set of requirements for brotherhood—Sigma Chis are in a perfect position to uphold the role of the gentleman. For ingrained within those seven tenets, beginning with good character and ending with personal responsibility, lies the very essence of what it means to be one. Thus, we have a responsibility and duty, not only to the Fraternity, or ourselves, but also to society at large, to live daily by the Standard. By promulgating gentlemanly conduct through our own actions, perhaps we can help to preserve and safeguard the concept of the gentleman. After all, to be a Sigma Chi is to be a true gentleman.

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