

The
Wriston
2012
Lecture

THE ONE HOSS SHAY

David Mamet

Playwright, screenwriter & director, and author of
THE SECRET KNOWLEDGE: ON THE DISMANTLING
OF AMERICAN CULTURE

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MANHATTAN INSTITUTE FOR POLICY RESEARCH

The Wriston Lecture

In 1987 the Manhattan Institute initiated a lecture series in honor of Walter B. Wriston (1919–2005), banker, author, government adviser, and member of the Manhattan Institute’s board of trustees. The Wriston Lecture has since been presented annually in New York City with honorees drawn from the worlds of government, academia, religion, business, and the arts. In establishing the lecture, the trustees of the Manhattan Institute—who serve as the selection committee—have sought to inform and enrich intellectual debate surrounding the great public issues of our day, and to recognize individuals whose ideas or accomplishments have left a mark on the world.

2012 Wriston Lecturer

DAVID MAMET

David Mamet is the author of numerous plays including *Oleanna*, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984 Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award), *American Buffalo*, *Speed-the-Plow*, *Boston Marriage*, *November*, *Race*, and *The Anarchist*. Mamet has written the screenplays for such films as *The Verdict*, *The Untouchables*, and *Wag the Dog*, and has twice been nominated for an Academy Award. He has written and directed 10 films including *Homicide*, *The Spanish Prisoner*, *State and Main*, *House of Games*, *Spartan*, and *Redbelt*. In addition, Mamet has written the novels *The Village*, *The Old Religion*, *Wilson*, and many books of non-fiction, including *Bambi vs. Godzilla: On the Nature, Purpose, and Practice of the Movie Business* and the *New York Times* bestseller *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture*. His HBO film *Phil Spector*, starring Al Pacino and Helen Mirren, will air this winter. He was co-creator and executive producer of the CBS television show *The Unit*, and is a founding member of The Atlantic Theater Company.

INTRODUCTION

Paul E. Singer

Good evening, everyone. I'm Paul Singer, chairman of the Manhattan Institute. On behalf of the Institute's trustees, I welcome you this evening.

For over 30 years, David Mamet has been a defining force in theater and film. He has given us some of the great movies and plays of our time, including his most famous play and film, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. Mamet revolutionized American theater in the 1970s and 1980s. With his realistic, powerful dialogue, his characters speak the way real, modern Americans speak: honest, direct, and unvarnished. During most of his astonishingly successful career, Mamet considered himself an unabashed liberal. He credits the Los Angeles rabbi Mordecai Finley with sparking his political conversion by introducing him to the ideas of conservative giants like Thomas Sowell, Friedrich Hayek, and Milton Friedman. I must point out that two of those three gentlemen have delivered our Wriston Lecture.

In 2008, Mamet wrote a controversial op-ed for the *Village Voice* titled “Why I Am No Longer a ‘Brain-Dead Liberal,’” in which he questioned some of his former beliefs. Last year, his conversion complete, Mamet published *The Secret Knowledge*, an intellectual tour de force that describes the evolution of his mind. In the book, Mamet describes how, after much reading and reflection, he came to the conclusion that “a free market understanding of the world meshes more perfectly with my experiences than that ideological vision I called liberalism.”

Mamet’s intellectual transformation demonstrates two extremely impressive qualities. One is intellectual independence and a commitment to pursue the truth as best as we can understand it. It is never easy to reexamine, with bracing honesty, lifelong assumptions. In doing so, David Mamet has set an impressive example for his fellow citizens. And he showed another quality as well: courage. Mamet’s decision to speak out on behalf of conservatism, particularly given the circles he travels in, was no easy thing. He was cutting against the grain of his professional world. He must have known that taking this stand, and doing so in the forthright manner that he did, would upset and even enrage people with whom he has worked over the years. But Mamet showed that he believed in the words of Teddy Roosevelt: “Aggressive fight for the right is the noblest sport the world affords.”

Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said, “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture, and save it from itself.” In his remarks tonight, Mamet will give us a look into his mind and experiences, the intersection of culture and politics. Please join me in welcoming David Mamet.

THE ONE HOSS SHAY

David Mamet

What a magnificent introduction. Thank you very much, Paul Singer, and thank you, Larry Mone. And thank you all here tonight. I was thinking about Harold Pinter, who was a friend of mine, may he rest in peace. Harold, when he accepted the Nobel Prize, wrote a rather scathing indictment of the West. I thought back to a time when I was making a movie with Harold. We were shooting in Whitechapel in London, a Jewish neighborhood, and he started reminiscing about his life growing up over his uncle Morty's radio shop. His magnificent radio actor voice became Yiddish. He went back to 1938 and his face lit up, remembering those days growing up in the warmth of the Jewish ghetto of London. I thought, how can Harold Pinter, whom I did and do revere, denigrate the West when, if it weren't for the United States, he and every other Jew in London would have been killed? I thought that was kind of odd. I was remembering the intersection of his political views and his cultural upbringing. Then I remembered when Harold first started writing about politics. I was a young writer, maybe in my twenties, and he was probably

fifty-something. I thought, isn't it a shame that this wonderful writer has turned into an old man, and all he can do is write about politics, because his powers have waned? Well, ha ha.

The 2012 Emmys began with a predictable round of jokes about Republicans, including an exhortation to applaud the fact that there were no Republicans in Hollywood. Any who were Republicans must be in hiding, or be very lonely indeed. My question was: What did this partisan humor have to do with a trade show? Particularly with a trade show beholden in every moment and in every way to capitalism, to a medium developed to flog goods, by the sale of which those at the Emmys made their living. And what of the barn owl? I quote from the catalog of an old, revered American clothing company that branched out into selling knickknacks: "Naturally sustainable white poplar barn owl, environmentally friendly, and organic-based paint, reclaimed glass eyes, base made of a reclaimed horseshoe." Who needs a barn owl? And what is this owl, the composition of which should obsess us? What is the reason behind this compulsivity? It is the continual proclamation that self-government is unnecessary, that one need not apply reason, restraint, or courage in the making of difficult decisions, and that one need only spout the party line—continually.

In a recent television ad, a group of celebrities pledged allegiance to Obama. This act may differ in degree, but not in kind, from any fascist salute. And when did we begin in this country to pledge allegiance to human beings? I brought this along because Joe Kernen and his daughter wrote a great book, *Your Teacher Said What?!* This is what my 13-year-old child brought home from public school. "Are you a Democrat or Republican on gun control? A Democrat wants to restrict the number and amount of guns. A Republican wants to allow citizens to buy guns without restriction." On the environment, "the Democrat wants to make factories reduce pollution, restrict drilling for oil in national parklands. And a Republican wants *not* to pass pollution laws that would cost factories money." This is in a public school. If that's not taxation without representation, I don't know what is.

That the exhortations of the Left are unreasonable and inconsistent ensures that no one will adopt them accidentally because of their utility. They are thus a perfect pledge of allegiance, but their lack of reason ensures that they must

be continually repeated as such and that every possible instance or occasion be introduced by a protestation of faith or an anathema of the other side. Should the leftist omit the obsessive incantations, the repressed—doubt—might accidentally intrude. See also the Marine recruit who is or was drilled to begin each sentence, each response, with “sir.” Lest, as he was instructed, he added an invitation to offer himself for sex. This was noted by the psychologist de Clérambault in 1921 and known as de Clérambault’s Syndrome, where the individual, overcome by authority, is shocked into compulsive confession of his willingness to submit.

Like houseguests and strangers, a member of the liberal community is continually taxed with establishing his bona fides. In a happy family, a work environment, or a religious organization—a community, in short—one may relax this inquisition and get on with the communal tasks. This is the most immediate benefit of community—and from it, other benefits flow. Accepting community standards and committing oneself to their propagation, one trades some potential freedom of action for increased security in the moment. True community members share certain basic assumptions, so their behavior is more predictable. They may violate community standards, but the penalty—excommunication, shame, or ostracism—is clear and costly. So transgression of the norms is more restricted.

But time with strangers must constantly be spent establishing the limits of intimacy. Our most compact social unit is the family, and it functions almost completely in modes of behaviors that are so long and definitively established that they’ve become unconscious. In the family, how one greets, praises, reprimands, apologizes, lies, demands, complains—though unconscious—is familiar to the family: completely known and completely clear. The inclusion of even the most beloved of houseguests disturbs the ease of family interaction. The knowledge previously consigned to the unconscious mind must be brought to the conscious mind and explained, altered, or suspended for the benefit of the guest, which is why, as Mr. Franklin told us, fish and visitors begin to stink after three days. The toll in energy is huge. Tolstoy said that you know a marriage is falling apart when the husband’s or wife’s conversation progresses logically.

It’s impossible to convene even the smallest and most transitory of human groups without them improvising, if they cannot discover, a social structure,

which is to say, a culture. Culture grows in mysterious ways, and its growth has nothing to do with reason. Is it reasonable, for example, that all Americans have to say, “What seems to be the trouble, officer?” Where is it written? Or that they have to say, “Hi, we can’t get to the phone right now, but if you leave your name and number...”? Where are these forms prescribed? A culture extemporizes itself and observances in response to communal necessity, to deal with which it also extemporizes myths. These myths, no less than political views or modes of organization, can derive only from the limited recurring number of human problems and human solutions.

The Left’s discovery of global warming, the sinfulness of man causing the seas to rise and so destroy humankind, may also be found in Genesis 6. Consider the taking of snapshots. Before the shutters click, the photographer says, “One, two, three.” Here’s why, I think. In the first days of portrait photography, an exposure could last up to three minutes. So the sitters’ heads were immobilized by a brace. If they moved, the shot would be foggy, so they were instructed to remain perfectly still. As the three minutes were about to end, the photographer would reassure them, “Almost done. One, two, three, now we’re done.” Contemporary cameras can take a snapshot in one-thousandth of a second, but still the photographer says, “One, two, three.” Why? Because photographers have always said, “One, two, three.” But now the phrase is uttered before the shot. If asked why, the photographer might say, “To allow the subject to compose himself.” But why does the subject need to compose himself? This makes every amateur portrait lifelessly the same with the subject’s face, having adopted that selfsame “I am now getting my picture taken” mode. In the original photos, the sitters looked stern and had to hold still. In the contemporary posed shots, every one of us looks like a fool. Not only is exposure instantaneous; there’s no need for stillness. But it persists and turns without thought and seemingly without human intervention from the useful to the residuals into destructive.

Cities each have their own culture. In San Francisco, a greeting to a stranger is likely to be returned; in New York, ignored; and in Los Angeles, responded to with frigid rage. Likewise, there’s our beautiful American culture, which can be found most readily in our jokes, puns, or allusions to stand-up comedy or television commercials. Are television commercials the lowest denominator of culture? Of course. Thus they are the most powerful and cohesive.

We saw a great television commercial at the Super Bowl. There's a holocaust, and a city is buried in rubble. Later, tough trucks of the manufacturer's brand emerge, one by one, from the rubble. The drivers get out to congratulate one another, all glad to be alive and to have had the wisdom to purchase so great a truck. One survivor says to another, "Have a Twinkie." So what we have here is an allusion to a magnificent American myth. An urban legend, taken from the very schoolyard where we've told one another for 50 years, "Twinkies have a shelf life of 10 million years." So why might people buy the truck? Because in enjoying the allusion, enjoying the commonality, they were united in the most heavy of experiences, which is belonging.

The Left ridicules the notion of culture and enshrines intellect. To them, all things may be reasoned through. If we were only intelligent enough to choose more intelligent leaders, all the age-old problems would disappear. But in the celebration of omnipotent intellect, we citizens become, like those houseguests, dedicated to figuring out how a family works, and how, first of all, to refrain from offending one another. Out goes patriotism, religion, free enterprise, freedom of conscience, and the free exercise of legal rights, which anyone who takes the soapbox might offend. Out, in short, goes the culture.

Now we are stymied because we don't know how to replace those practices. So a new culture is improvised. Speak to no one at the airport. Ride for 12 hours across the ocean and don't introduce yourself. Don't talk to anybody on the elevator. Keep your mouth shut because anything might offend. Alter your speech in response to any suggestion that it might offend. And demand from all a fealty to the one uniting power, the new culture, whose champion is the Left. For you, without a culture, are alone, confused, and lost.

The Obama campaign's 2008 "change" may thus be understood as a directive: change or suffer. Shall you stand up or sit down when "The Star-Spangled Banner" is sung? Shall you sing or not? Should a man open a door for a woman? Is it permitted for whites to criticize a failed politician if he's black? Are terrorists entitled to the same protections enjoyed by citizens? Should folks of the same sex be allowed to marry? Has "he or she" replaced "he" as the correct pronoun?

They're operationally the same question, as they create fear. The questioner has no idea where to look for guidance or clarification. Just like the houseguest

and the host locked in the least terminable of discussions—the insistence on deference in all things, the mutual desire to express courtesy driving both sides mad. This fear of a cultural vacuum is historically filled by the spontaneous emergence of two aids: a leader and an enemy.

The culturally unsettled need a strongman, someone unquestionably superior to themselves in vision and intellect and thus deserving allegiance that will replace the structure sacrificed in the culture's abandonment. This is the czar so beloved of the Left: Lenin, Marx, Freud, Castro, Stalin, Hitler; car czar, enemy czar, director of bisexual-trans-gay-lesbian-questioning-then-queer studies, someone whom one can believe in amid “the mess we've inherited,” which was previously known as the United States of America. See also Jim Jones, Sun Myung Moon, Bernie Madoff, and all those claiming by intellect or faith that they can supervene the natural laws.

If there were such a thing as historical necessity, why would we have to aid it? Must one not at least question the sense of proportion of a human being who proclaims that “Under us, the seas will cease to rise”? These ideologues, opportunist visionaries, quacks, and thugs seem to lead; but as per Tolstoy, they actually emerge from and ride for power impelled by the mass confusion of the unbalanced group.

The political impulse to submission, for all it is explained as more reasonable than outmoded forms—representative government, religion, and culture—may also be seen allied to the impulse of those in extremis who seek out magic. The psychic healer, energy therapist, bloodless surgeon, past-lives therapist, and the worshiper of the political strongman each trade autonomy for magic. But the power of the magic feathers, the magic beans, and the stimulus, like the resurrection of Tinker Bell, cannot be attempted without sacrifice. Here is the sacrifice of reason, the contemporary equivalent of gashing the flesh to make it rain. Sacrifice, of course, implies a supernatural recipient—indeed, an angry god; and it requires an intercessor, a strongman, a priest, perhaps a demigod himself, to teach us the acceptable forms. The political dupe may be questioned by his non-afflicted brother to adduce reasons that the failed politician, the incipient dictator, the flimflam man, the pretender to godhood, should be supported when his words are meaningless, his promises either in-

choate or failed, and his word proved worthless. But this misses the point. For as with the psychic healer, it is not the promised result of submission for which the afflicted is paying but for the experience of submission itself, which is a real, if transitory, cure for his anxiety.

The victim of the mystic healer is kept in the fold by promises that the treatment will work, but it will take more money, more time, or more belief than previously suspected. The victim of the demagogue, quizzical about the failure of his idol to accomplish anything promised, is also taught—indeed, self-taught—that the magic just needs time to work and that the disease was worse than previously imagined. To suggest otherwise is not only illogical but impious. This political dupe, just like the object of an intervention, can cathect any residual doubt as rage onto those who are trying to help him. This may be understood as demonic, as it seems to require both apostasy and psychic disillusion.

The exercise of total faith is that benefit for which the leftist has paid with his autonomy. Its merest weakening is to him equal to psychological death. Consider that it leaves him alone. For if deprived by doubt of his essential identity with a believing group, he is also deprived of potential community with his opponents, whom he has just recently denounced as the devil. Man is a social animal. So no prodigy of sophistry is too great or too embarrassing to those threatened with his stranding.

President Obama, they say, fell apart on television [during his first debate with Mitt Romney] because he wasn't used to the altitude in Denver. He was unresponsive because to have answered back would have branded him as an "uppity Negro." This is the president of the United States. See the autonomic emergence in the liberal community and the spontaneous sequential adoption of excuses for his failure: "Look at the mess he inherited." "You just oppose him because he's a black man." "Any program needs time." "The system itself is broken." "The job's too big for one man." And finally, "You know what? They're all the same."

We human beings are lonely. That is why we are interested in life on other planets, in past lives, and in politics. That is why we fantasize about, and adopt,

small groups—gays, blacks, Palestinians, the handicapped—as totems. In addition to an expression of legitimate humanitarian concerns is the delightful fantasy that these groups are compressed by difficulties into a magnificent pure unity, unavailable to the masses. We, the larger polity, imagine them as tribes, which is to say exotics, enjoying all the benefits of that gift of culture that we in the larger group have wished away.

These tribes, we feel, possess to perfection those two things that the victim of anomie seeks in his political subjugation: communal purpose and an enemy. The Left names this enemy big business, the corporations, the “1 percent,” the homophobe, the rich, the Jews, America. This enemy is necessary not because the troubled are hateful but because they are weakened. They have become weak through the constant intolerable expenditure of energy in the improvisation of a culture, like strangers on a cruise, perpetually bantering.

A houseguest in what was previously his own country—the leftist who has quite literally pledged allegiance to Obama—fears that his most precious possession, belief, may encounter a rational challenge, either from himself or from another, that is insurmountable, and then his faith will fail. But the priceless appearance of a foul fiend can enliven his resolve, calling not upon his exhausted belief but upon his inexhaustible courage. I would suggest that the beleaguered leftist reimagine himself as Horatius at the bridge, but that poem, universally read in the public schools of my youth, is no longer of cultural currency.

Which of the songs and texts of my youth remain? “Casey at the Bat,” “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean,” “O Captain! My Captain!,” “The Deacon’s Masterpiece or the Wonderful One-Hoss Shay,” “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the Lord’s Prayer, the Kaddish, the Communion, the Mass, the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address. Those various productions of poetry, universally read 50 years ago, are replaced in the brave new world by slogans and the reduction of debatable propositions to commands. Celebrate diversity, for example; where once we did not exhort, but practice the celebration of its polar opposite—unity—the exhortation still appearing on our coins.

English literature until the last mid-century was largely allusive. It assumed a common knowledge of the Bible, the Gospels, the Constitution, the works of

Shakespeare, and various poets of that region in time. There is that called poetry still written today, but I defy anyone here to quote one line read as recently as last week. Yet we remember for our entire lives what moved us, not by command, or by appeal to the intellect, but by resonance with the soul, which is different from the political beliefs that we all share. I remember the Oliver Wendell Holmes poem “The Deacon’s Masterpiece or the Wonderful One-Hoss Shay”:

*Have you heard of the wonderful one-hoss shay,
That was built in such a logical way
It ran a hundred years to a day,
And then of a sudden it—ah, but stay,
I’ll tell you what happened without delay,
Scaring the parson into fits,
Frightening people out of their wits,—
Have you ever heard of that, I say?*

Holmes goes on to characterize how it all fell apart in one instant after 100 years, and it ends:

*You see, of course, if you’re not a dunce,
How it went to pieces all at once,—
All at once, and nothing first,—
Just as bubbles do when they burst.*

Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that in 1858. And in 1972, Sir John Glubb, a British historian, wrote a pamphlet called “The Fate of Empires, 1972.” He wrote that the great empires—Assyria, Persia, Greece, the Roman, the Arab Empires, the Ottoman Empires, Spain, Russia, Britain—each flourished for about 250 years. This seems to be the space allotted for imperial hegemony. Too long a period of power leads to decadence, and as the family goes from shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves in three generations, so the empire goes from the pioneers to the innovators to the bureaucrats, from exploration on exploitation to decadence, the quest for world approval, the welfare state, and squabbles over inherited wealth.

A notable feature, Glubb writes, of the declining nations is the loss of physical energy. He suggests, as does the Bible, that the state as a human organism is no

different from the family. Both recapitulate human individual tendencies and, like the individual human, evolve in predictable directions. The human might indeed live 120 years, but no longer, and will decay through predictable stages, as will the family, however wealthy—as will the state, however powerful.

Now we see that we in America are at the end of Sir John Glubb's 250 years. We see the signs posited by Glubb. We've passed through the ages of outburst, conquest, commerce, affluence, intellect, and we've come to the age of decadence. This, in all empires, he writes, can be identified by defensiveness, pessimism, materialism, frivolity, the welfare state, the dissolution of the armed forces, the weakening of religion, and the attempt to curry favor in the world.

But Glubb wrote a companion essay, "The Search for Survival," in which he observes that each of us can contribute to the recovery of our country by working harder and by fostering a sense of comradeship and good work and that only the revival of spiritual devotion, not fashionable "isms," can inspire selfless service. Each of us can contribute by leading moral and dedicated lives and by speaking and writing in that sense. If we have no leaders, we must go it alone. In the Chicago Public Schools, we regularly read "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" and "Horatius at the Bridge"; perhaps, as in "Horatius at the Bridge," it is not quite time to ask, "How can man die better than by facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers, and the temple of his gods?" But it's evident that the time for sacrifice for the sake of the country and the Judeo-Christian values in which it was founded is near.

The Left is insistent on the absolute primacy of its notions regarding abortion, birth control, sex education, sterilization, and gay rights. Looking at these issues, we are reminded that Tolstoy said that the first visible signals of change are often mistaken for the mode of force. The bow wave, which we see first, is the most apparent but does not impel the ship. The smoke, which we see first, is the most apparent, but does not impel the locomotive. The shibboleths of the Left similarly seem to be the championship of various causes. Taken in toto, however, and independent of protestation, they call for a lowering of the birthrate, which is a universal sign of national decline.

See also the attendant call from the Left for the lowering or abolition of the requirements for citizenship. The Left would say that traditional definitions

of such are an egregious example of American exceptionalism (which is to say, arrogance) and that we are first citizens of the world. But citizenship implies defined rights and obligations. What rights does an American have in North Korea, Iran, China, or, for that matter, in Indonesia? And what rights does an American Jew, gay, or woman enjoy in Syria? What obligations do we have to the French nation? To suggest that we're citizens of the world destroys our understanding of the term and weakens us in the performance of the duties of a citizen.

One might say that the apogee of American power was the 1969 moon landing and that since then, we—the most successful empire in history, according the greatest access to prosperity, happiness in public life and history—have been in a decline. This decline, as Gibbon told us, is inevitable. Nothing lasts forever. This period of diminishing American hegemony, however, may be one of healthy age. We citizens are the owners of its country and its board of directors, and we may find the strength to reasonably consider the options open to us in this confusing time. None of them is perfect. This is a sign that we must make a moral choice between two flawed—indeed, bad—alternatives. If we do not choose, the choice will be made for us by those interested at home and abroad in weakening the power of the American electorate. It's not a brave announcement that our country is imperfect. None of the works of man is perfect. But it is our country to govern, to defend, and to enjoy as long as we choose to set our minds to it.

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