

THE BLAME GAME
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It starts when we are but wee toddlers. As soon as we understand our parents' language, we become acquainted with the concept. We don't have to be well-traveled on this journey of life before we hear the Question; the one we learn to dread: "Did you do *that*?" Of course, in our universally consistent 2- or 3-year-old skill set, we almost always did do *that*, and we suffer the consequences. Whatever *that* is, our parents (who are usually first-timers, and didn't fully read the "How to Raise a Kid" manual) will try, as good parents should, to teach us about personal responsibility, fairness in relationships, and how to be considerate of the needs of others. They will try various means, but will eventually revert to a language we understand; a light smack on the hand, a stern talking to with liberal finger shaking, or a time out in the corner without Teddy to keep us company.

If this works, we will eventually understand that we have done something we shouldn't have, and our actions have caused trouble for ourselves and others. We will conclude that if we don't want to duplicate these consequences in the future, we will need to change our ways. If it DOESN'T work, we will assume that, except for getting caught, we haven't really done anything all that bad, and we will devise ways to do what we want without being bothered by consequences. We will simply avoid receiving the blame for our actions. Often, the best way to avoid blame is to divert the attention to some other poor hapless soul, usually a younger sibling, letting them enjoy the fruits of our labors while we go out to play with a smirk on our face. If we succeed at this, we have learned how to play the Blame Game.

As adults, we (eventually, hopefully) realize that the concepts our parents were trying to teach us are vitally important in maintaining relationships and enjoying a functioning society. People simply must assume responsibility for their actions. Most of our laws and regulations are in place to assure that folks simply do what they already know to do. Still, people being people, there are some who feel they should be allowed to pursue whatever goals they like, for business or pleasure, regardless of the consequences to others; and if things go wrong, it's certainly not their fault. This may work for a short while, but eventually the house of cards will collapse and somebody will be left holding the bag. In the blame game the people who suffer are usually not the ones who committed the wrong, while those who instigated the situation get off without so much as a time out.

The recent economic downturn was brought about by a number of factors, but many of them have to do with unprincipled business practices, self-serving political maneuvers, and just plain greed. Why did banks abandon 200-year-old lending practices that had a proven track record? Why did the government push companies like Countrywide to write mortgages for people they statistically knew couldn't pay them back? Why did people believe they could borrow more against a house than it was worth, or borrow on a mortgage with initial low payments, which converted to an astronomical balloon note in 5 years or so? With the mammoth size of our economy, it took several years for the effects of these practices to trickle down to ground level and begin to affect the public; but when it did, it happened in a hurry. Immediately, people who couldn't continue to make their house payments began to cry out to the government. After all, the government isn't supposed to allow this to happen, right?

In this case, the government was part of the problem; but who was available to make them answer for it? Instead, there were other things that caught our attention. A war against terrorism was being waged. We still didn't know fully who was to blame for 9/11. Then Katrina visited us.

The opposing party took great delight in blaming the President for damage caused by a hurricane. Iran was about to have nuclear weapons. Who let that happen? A freak rainstorm caused extensive flooding in Middle Tennessee. Wasn't that Obama's fault? Steve McNair was brutally murdered by his girlfriend in Nashville. Soon, we were shown images of his son standing outside his apartment asking, "Who is to blame for my daddy's death?"

Playing the Blame Game has worked its way into all aspects of American life. Kids in school are subject to a zero-tolerance policy because parents won't allow school officials to use judgment in dealing with their children. Doctors must charge extra to pay for exorbitant malpractice insurance because we have become so lawsuit-oriented. Not even the weather can happen without somebody having to defend themselves because of the consequences. Almost everything we do is touched by this Blame Game. As a result, we suffer loss of liberty; we pay extra for many things; and sometimes, we even take the blame for things we didn't do. What would happen if we had Congressional hearings that never asked, "Whodunit?" but instead asked, "How do we fix it and move on?" What would our lives be like if we adopted the attitude of taking responsibility without being forced to do so by law or a scandal? How can we teach our children to be responsible if we ourselves won't step up and say, "It was me. I will have to pay."

Fact is, the Blame Game doesn't work, not in government, or politics, or marriages, or business, or families. It's a game that doesn't have any winners. Everyone loses. Everyone pays.