Robert W. Fuller

All Rise

Somebodies, Nobodies, and the Politics of Dignity

"*All Rise* gives us a clear mandate for transforming our society into a true democracy."
Rosalind Wiseman, author of *Queen Bees and Wannabees*

An Excerpt From

All Rise:
Somebodies, Nobodies, and the Politics of Dignity

by Robert W. Fuller
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WHAT IS RANKISM?

WHY DO YOU SMILE? CHANGE BUT THE NAME, AND
IT IS OF YOURSELF THAT THE TALE IS TOLD.
— HORACE, ROMAN POET AND SATIRIST

A Once and Future Nobody

NONE OF US likes to be taken for a nobody. In order to protect our dignity, we cultivate the skill of presenting ourselves as a somebody. But despite our best efforts, it may come to pass that we wake up one morning and find ourselves in Nobodyland.

At midlife that happened to me, and for quite some time I couldn't seem to get out. Then one morning I heard new words to an old slogan buzzing in my head: "Nobodies of the world, unite! We have nothing to lose but our shame."

A slogan like that calls for a manifesto. In a few frenzied months I wrote a first draft, which I called *The Nobody Book*. It argued that nobodies are not defenseless against the put-downs of somebodies and showed what they can do in response to such attacks.

I made a half-dozen copies and foisted them on my friends. The first thing I heard from them was, "Change the title! No one would want to read something called *The Fat Book* and no one will want to read *The Nobody Book* either." But everyone insisted on telling me about the

times they'd been "nobodied." I started collecting their stories and recalled a few of my own.

I remembered Arlene in second grade, exiled to the hall as punishment for having dirty fingernails. I winced at the memory of Burt, who had bullied me and my friends at summer camp. I recalled with chagrin how my playmates and I had tormented a kid with Down syndrome, and how Professor Mordeau had made fun of my faulty French accent. Memories of the Sunday school teacher who threatened us with eternal damnation returned.

I began to see stories of humiliation and indignity in the news as well as close at hand: abuse scandals in churches and prisons, corporations defaulting on employee pensions, hypercompetitive parents berating child athletes, the staff at my parents' retirement home patronizing residents.

The Abuse of Rank

One day all these behaviors came into a single focus: they could all be seen as abuses of rank—more precisely, the power attached to rank. I recognized myself as a once and future nobody, and wondered if that wasn't everyone's fate. As the anecdotes multiplied, I incorporated them into the manuscript. After numerous reorganizations of the material, I printed a dozen copies, passed them around and awaited the verdict. People still hedged their bets, but they all wanted me to hear about their own attempts to get out of Nobodyland.

The reframing and rewriting continued. A third draft. The analysis was extended and gained in clarity. A fourth. After a few years, I submitted a version to several publishers. They responded with boilerplate rejections. One editor opined that the material was compelling and might even have broad appeal, but saw an insurmountable problem: "Nobodies don't buy books!"

A friend suggested creating a Web site where I could at least give the book away. So I hired a college math major to design one. Her creation gave oxygen to the project. We dubbed the site breakingranks.net, and it's still going strong on the Web.

Overnight, it got thousands of hits. On an online forum, strangers shared their stories of abuse and discrimination. Two thousand visitors to the site downloaded the free manuscript. One of them put a copy into the hands of a small publisher, and just when I'd about given up hope of ever seeing it appear between two covers I received an e-mail inquiring about rights to it. A meeting was arranged, a contract signed, and in the spring of 2003 New Society Publishers in British Columbia brought out a hardcover edition of *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*.[1]

Getting the word out that spring was made more difficult by the Iraq war, the start of which coincided to the day with the book's publication. Round-the-clock coverage of the conflict lasted about a month, but during the blackout I got a break: Oprah's magazine featured the book in an article titled "R-E-S-P-E-C-T," and suddenly my phone started ringing.[2] Twelve cities and a hundred interviews later, the book had found its audience. For a few heady days, it even managed to edge out the latest Harry Potter book at Amazon.com. It seems that nobodies do buy books after all!

Recognizing Rankism

Nobodyland isn't really such a bad place, so long as you aren't trying to get out. You can do a lot of good work there, and since you're out of sight, you are free to make mistakes, explore new ideas, and develop them until you're ready to try them in public. When, at long last, I did get the chance to do so, I got an earful in response.

Some people scolded me for wasting their time: "Everything in your book is in the Bible. It shouldn't take 150 pages to get to the golden rule." A couple of wary souls feared this was another cult. And a handful protested, "Not another 'ism'!" and dismissed the idea of *rankism* as "just more political correctness," "radical egalitarianism," or "Fabian drivel."

But most respondents—even the self-confessed cynics—welcomed the naming and spotlighting of rank-based abuse and expressed the hope that by targeting rankism we could consolidate our gains over the now-familiar isms—racism, sexism, ageism, ableism,[3] and so on—and

eventually extend the sway of democratic principles so as to secure dignity for everybody. Here are a few remarks posted on the Web site or sent as e-mail:

> Rankism is the ism that, once eradicated, would pretty much eliminate the rest of them.
>
> Rankism is so ingrained, so common, that it's hard to even notice it.
>
> Rankism gives a name to something we've all experienced but probably not given much thought to. Once you have a name for it, you see it everywhere.
>
> It's comforting to know that a lot of the insults I've put up with in my life are being experienced by people everywhere. I for one am sick of being nobodied.
>
> Recognizing rankism makes you more conscious of your dignity.
>
> I have begun using the term rankism, explained it to my friends, and now they are using it, too.

In the three years following the publication of *Somebodies and Nobodies* I learned that there is indeed an iceberg of indignation out there of which we're seeing only the tip. Below the waterline lies the bottled-up resentments of millions who are nobodied every day. I heard from kids, parents, teachers, nurses, physicians, managers, professionals, and workers of every stripe. The impotent rage they must contain—whether at home, in school, or on the job—exacts a toll on their health and happiness and hence on their creativity and productivity. Occasionally their repressed indignation erupts in what others see as a senseless act of violence. But violence is rarely, if ever, senseless. If it seems so, we've simply failed to understand it. Like the original n-word, *nobody* is an epithet that packs a powerful punch. That is why we're so desperate to pass as somebodies and shield ourselves from rankism's punishing sting.

Another thing I've learned is that once people have a diagnosis for what ails them, they want a cure for it. Many asked me for more concrete strategies for fighting rankism. They also wanted a clearer picture of what a *dignitarian* society—a society in which rank-holders are held accountable, rankism is disallowed, and dignity is broadly protected—would look like and tools that could be used for building one. The purpose of this book is to address those requests.

For those of you who haven't read *Somebodies and Nobodies,* here's a little background.

Power Matters

Like most people who experienced the social movements of the sixties, my attention at the time was drawn to personal attributes such as color, gender, disability, or age, each of which was associated with its own form of prejudice. But as a college president in the early seventies, I found myself dealing with the women's, black, and student movements all at once and from a position of authority at the vortex of the storms they were generating on campus. This gave me a vantage point from which I began to sense that something more than trait-sanctioned discrimination was going on, something deeper and more encompassing. What struck me was that, despite changes in the cast of characters and differences in rhetoric, each of these movements could be seen as a group of weaker and more vulnerable "nobodies" petitioning for an end to oppression and indignity at the hands of entrenched, more powerful "somebodies."

From this point of view, it becomes obvious that characteristics such as religion, color, gender, and age are merely excuses for discrimination, never its cause. Indeed, such features signify weakness only when there is a social consensus in place that handicaps those bearing them. Anti-Semitism, Jim Crow segregation, patriarchy, and homophobia are all complex social agreements that have functioned to disempower whole categories of people and keep them susceptible to abuse and exploitation.

The personal traits that define the various identity groups are pretexts around which social stratifications are built and maintained. But

at the deepest level, these arrangements foster and support injustice based on something less conspicuous but no less profound in its consequences: rank in the social hierarchy. All the various, seemingly disparate forms of discrimination actually have one common root: the presumption and assertion of rank to the detriment of others.

Providing further evidence for this shift in perspective was my realization that just as some whites bully other whites, so also do some blacks exploit other blacks and some women demean other women. Clearly, such intraracial and intragender abuses can't easily be accounted for within the usual trait-centered analyses. One approach is to account for black-on-black prejudice—sometimes called *colorism*—in terms of the "internalization of white oppression." But this explains one malady (black racism) in terms of another (white racism) and brings us no closer to a remedy for either. If the goal is to end racism of all kinds, it's more fruitful to see both inter- and intraracial discrimination as based on differences in power—that is, on who holds the higher position in a particular setting and therefore commands an advantage that forces victims to submit to their authority.

Viewing things in terms of power instead of color, gender, and so on is not intended to divorce the dynamics of racial or other forms of prejudice from the specific justifications that particular groups of somebodies use to buttress their claims to supremacy. But it does direct our attention to the real source of ongoing domination—a power advantage—and suggests that we'll end social subordination of every kind only as we disallow abuse stemming from simply having high enough rank to get away with it.

As the implications of all this sank in I realized that, as with the familiar liberation causes, abuse of the power associated with rank could not be effectively addressed so long as there was no name for it. Absent one, nobodies were in a position similar to that of women before the term *sexism* was coined. Writing in 1963, Betty Friedan characterized the plight of women as "the problem that has no name."[4] By 1968, the problem had acquired one: sexism. That simple word intensified consciousness-raising and debate and provided a rallying cry for a movement to oppose power abuse linked to gender.

A similar dynamic has played out with other identity groups seeking redress of their grievances. Those discriminated against on the basis of their race unified against racism. The elderly targeted *ageism.* By analogy, I adopted the term *rankism* to describe abuses of power associated with rank.

The coinage rankism is related to the colloquialisms *pulling rank* and *ranking on* someone, both of which bear witness to the signal importance of rank in human interactions. It is also worth noting that as an adjective, rank means foul, fetid, or smelly, and the verb *to rankle* means to cause resentment or bitterness. Although there is no etymological relationship between these usages and the word *rank* in the sense of position in a hierarchy, it's fitting that the word *rankism* picks up by association the malodor of its sound-alikes.

Rank can refer to either rank in society generally (social rank) or rank in a more narrowly defined context (such as within an institution or family). Thus, rankism occurs not just between and within social identity groups but in schools, businesses, health care organizations, religious institutions, the military, and government bureaucracies as well. Indeed, since most organizations are hierarchical and hierarchies are built around gradations of power, it comes as no surprise that they are breeding grounds for rank-based abuse.

Examples from everyday life include a boss harassing an employee, a doctor demeaning a nurse, a professor exploiting a graduate student, and students bullying each other. On a societal scale are headline-making stories of political and corporate corruption, sexual abuse by members of the clergy, and the maltreatment of elders in nursing homes.

Photos of the humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by their guards gave the entire world a look at rankism's arrogant face. Hurricane Katrina made visible its most common victims. The wealthy and connected, even those of moderate means, got out of New Orleans ahead of time. The poor, the sick, prisoners, the old, and those lacking transportation were trapped by nature's fury and then left to cope on their own during days of inaction by government officials and agencies. The inadequacies of the initial government response have since been compounded by another, deeply ingrained form of rankism—the regionalism that, since the Civil War, has manifested as the North holding itself superior to the South.

In addition to its universality, rankism differs from the familiar trait-based abuses because rank is not fixed the way race and gender generally are, but rather changes depending on the context. Someone can hold high rank in one setting (for example, at home) and simultaneously be low on the totem pole in another (at work). Likewise, we can feel powerful at one time and powerless at another, as when we move from childhood to adulthood and then from our "prime" into old age, or when we experience the loss of a job, a partner, or our health. As a result, most of us have been both victims and perpetrators of discrimination based on rank.

In summary, rankism occurs when those with authority use the power of their position to secure unwarranted advantages or benefits for themselves at the expense of others. It is the illegitimate use of rank, and equally, the use of rank illegitimately acquired or held. The familiar isms are all examples of the latter form. They are based on the construction and maintenance of differences in social rank that violate constitutional guarantees of equal protection under the law.

The relationship between rankism and the specific isms targeted by identity politics can be compared to that between cancer and its subspecies. For centuries the group of diseases that are now all seen as varieties of cancer were regarded as distinct illnesses. No one realized that lung, breast, and other organ-specific cancers all had their origins in a similar kind of cellular malfunction. In this metaphor, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other varieties of prejudice are analogous to organ-specific cancers and rankism is the blanket malady analogous to cancer itself. The familiar isms are subspecies of rankism. Just as medicine is now exploring grand strategies that will be applicable to all kinds of cancer, so too it may be more effective at this point to raise our sights and attack rankism itself rather than focusing on its individual varieties one by one.

Another analogy is to waves in water. You can look at racism, ageism, classism, homophobia, and so on as waves, or you can focus on the water of rankism. Neither perspective makes the other an optical illusion.[5]

Presently, backlash threatens the hard-won gains of the firmly established civil rights and women's movements as well as the more nascent

ones such as the movement for people with disabilities or the GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) movement. Moreover, identity politics generally is running into diminishing returns. Could it be that to complete the eradication of the familiar isms, we will have to include everyone—somebodies and nobodies alike—and redirect our attack onto the rankism that afflicts us all?

The Dignitarian Perspective

I almost never make it through an interview or a talk without being asked, "Are you proposing that we do away with rank?" It is crucial to understand that rank itself is not necessarily a problem. Unless rank is inherently illegitimate—as are, for example, the social rankings that have made second-class citizens of various identity groups—then the problem is not with rank per se but rather with the abuse of rank. This distinction goes to the heart of many of the most vexing issues that arise in our personal lives, society, and national politics.

The confusion occurs because rank is so commonly misused that many people mistakenly conclude that the only remedy is to abolish it. This makes no more sense than attempting to solve racial problems by doing away with all races but one, or addressing gender issues by eliminating one gender. Ignoring differences in aptitude, ability, and performance and attempting to eradicate the differences of rank that reflect them has repeatedly failed those who have tried it. The socialists of nineteenth-century Europe and the communists of the twentieth century disappointed their supporters. And when egalitarian ideologies did prevail, those leaderships typically imposed even worse tyrannies than the ones they replaced.

Abolishing distinctions of rank that facilitate cooperation can also weaken a society to the point that it becomes vulnerable to existing enemies or invites new ones. History suggests that political and social models that try to do away with rank altogether are naïvely utopian and that societies that adopt them court catastrophe. The nineteenth-century French historian Alexis de Tocqueville devoted a chapter of his classic *Democracy in America* to the connections between equality and despotism.[6]

When legitimately earned and properly used, rank is an important—often indispensable—organizational tool for accomplishing group goals. The more central rank is to achieving an organization's mission—for example, in the military—the more critical it is to distinguish it from rankism and to honor the former while eliminating the latter. Not every assertion of rank is rankist—only those that put the dignity of the high-ranking above that of those they serve.

We rightfully admire and love authorities—parents, teachers, bosses, political leaders—who hold their rank and use the power that comes with it in an exemplary way. Accepting their leadership entails no loss of self-respect or opportunity on the part of subordinates. It is when people abuse their power to demean or disadvantage those they outrank that seeds of indignity are sown. Over time, indignity turns to indignation, and smarting victims may be left thirsting for vengeance. The consequences can range from relatively benign foot-dragging all the way to genocide.

Organization of this Book

Somebodies and Nobodies concluded with a vision of a dignitarian society. Such a society does not aim to abolish or equalize ranks, but rather holds that regardless of our rank, we are all equal when it comes to dignity. The word *dignitarian* is introduced to set this model apart from utopian egalitarian ones. The dignitarian approach sees the establishment of equal dignity as a stepping-stone to the more fair, just, and tolerant societies that political thinkers have long envisioned.[7]

This presents a chicken-and-egg problem: In building a dignity movement to overcome rankism, what should be the first objective—cultural or institutional change? In other words, should we focus on eradicating the rankism within ourselves and our culture or target the rankism "out there" in organizations and society? Some hold that we can't change our institutions until we change our personal attitudes; others insist that the institutions must be changed first because only then are the people affected by them at liberty to change.

The argument is unproductive. Certain people are drawn to personal psychology and cultural values, while others focus on reforming institutional policy or electoral politics. An advance on either flank makes possible an advance on the other.

Although the dynamics of social transformation are nonlinear, exposition is not. A writer has to choose an order in which to present ideas. The first three chapters of this book lay the groundwork by sketching the scope and impact of rankism, envisioning a dignity movement to overcome it, and introducing a key tool we'll use along the way: model building. The notion of model building may at first sound technical, perhaps even esoteric. But the use of this instrument is not limited to scientists and philosophers; on the contrary, as we'll see, it's commonplace in social situations as well.

Once we have this tool in our repertoire, we'll apply it first to explore how we can reshape our primary social and civic institutions so they become dignitarian. Chapters 4 through 8 examine what workplaces, schools, health care organizations, the economy, and politics would look like if they embodied dignitarian values.

Next, we'll use modeling to better the odds of establishing ourselves as dignitarians. The concluding chapters 9 through 12 develop a philosophical perspective that supports a dignitarian world. The afterword gives suggestions on how to get started.

1 What's at Stake

Rankism explains a lot of the bad behavior we see in both institutions and cultures, as well as between individuals. . . . Giving it a name empowers those on the receiving end to fight it, or at least to resist the corrosive effect it may have on their own souls.
—Esther Dyson, editor, *Release 1.0*

Seeing Rankism Everywhere

A common response to the notion of rankism is the one I had myself soon after I started using the word: I began seeing it everywhere. This surprised me at first, but not long afterward I realized this was a consequence of having defined rankism so broadly—as the abuse of the power attached to rank. It stands to reason that something defined this way would show up wherever power was in play—and that's almost everywhere. Once I accepted the ubiquity of rankism, another question arose. Could a concept that lumped so many seemingly different phenomena together really be useful?

Despite such hesitations, I kept spotting new examples of rankism on a daily basis. What's more, I felt as though I were seeing them through new eyes. Abuses I was resigned to, having long taken them for granted, suddenly began to appear open to challenge. It seemed possible that if we became more adept at identifying the common impulse from which these transgressions derive, we could recondition ourselves to forgo such behaviors.

Humans have managed to impose categorical illegitimacy on murder, incest, cannibalism, racism, and sexism. Some dominating, predatory behaviors that were the norm for centuries have diminished over time. As the consensus shifts about what's acceptable, even the impulse to engage in certain behaviors dissipates. Why couldn't this work with those that cause indignity, I wondered. Our species is learning to forgo racism. Couldn't we broaden the prohibition to all the various forms of rankism? I began to imagine a society in which targeting the dignity of others is no longer condoned, a world in which it gradually disappears in the same way that one can now begin to imagine racism becoming a behavior that utterly lacks social support.

Recently I read in the *New York Times* about a schoolteacher in rural China accused of serially raping the fourth- and fifth-grade girls in his class. His pupils had dared not protest the absolute authority traditionally held by teachers. The situation reminded me of the unquestioning esteem in which, at least until the recent sex abuse scandals, priests in the United States were typically held by their parishioners. As the article put it, "Parents grant teachers carte blanche, even condoning beatings, while students are trained to honor and obey teachers, never challenge them. 'The absolute authority of teachers in schools is one of the reasons that teachers are so fearless in doing what they want,' said an expert on Chinese education."[1]

Of course, rape is already a crime in almost all societies. The point is not that seeing rape as a form of rankism reveals its criminality. Many kinds of power abuse have acquired particular names of their own—for example, cronyism, embezzlement, extortion, nepotism, blackmail, McCarthyism, anti-Semitism, and sexual harassment. What identifying them all as rankism does is put them in a new light and reveal their commonality. Having the word *rankism* at one's disposal is a bit like putting on X-ray glasses that help you see through the many kinds of power abuse to the wrongful assertions of rank that figure in them all.

Reframing the problem in this way also suggests a way out—namely, by adopting a variant of the strategy that's already working against race- and gender-based abuses. To overcome racism and sexism, the targets

had to organize and then collectively oppose their tormentors with a commensurate, credible countervailing force.

There are obvious differences between a movement to overcome rankism in general and the identity-based movements. When it comes to the familiar varieties of discrimination, the victims and the victimizers are, for the most part, distinguishable and separate groups: black and white, female and male, gay and straight, and so on. The same thing that makes it easy to identify potential victims of these familiar isms—discernible characteristics like color and gender—facilitates the formation of a solidarity group to confront the perpetrators.

In contrast, the perpetrators and targets of rankism—the somebodies and the nobodies, respectively—do not fall neatly into distinct groups. As we've seen, most of us have played both roles, depending on time and place.

So the question is: Are we willing to forgo the potential advantages of exploiting weaker people in return for credible assurances that our own dignity will be secure should it ever come to pass that we find ourselves in their nobody shoes? To paraphrase the epigraph that appears at the beginning of this book, could we make dignity non-negotiable?

The following chapters aim to show that we can. Before getting on with it, however, it's important to get a clearer sense of just what's at stake in taking on rank-based abuse.

Lethal Consequences

That rankism underpins all the trait-based forms of discrimination already makes it a far-reaching phenomenon, one that extends well beyond the realm of hurt feelings and bruised egos to the more destructive consequences of repression and oppression. But most people will be surprised to learn that there are many other ways—some of them quite sobering—in which rankism wreaks havoc in our lives. Consider the following examples in which national pride was damaged, lives lost, and billions of dollars wasted as a result of rankist mismanagement.

In the fall of 2004 at a talk I gave in New Jersey, a distinguished-looking gentleman, who everyone present knew had served as the director of both NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center and the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, stood up and declared, "Rankism was a major contributing cause of both shuttle disasters." In April 2005, Dr. Noel Hinners elaborated for my tape recorder:

> The *Mars Climate Orbiter* mission failure in 1979 was due in part to what might be called technological rankism. It starts with an unquestioning reverence for those who are anointed as experts or who assume that mantle on their own. All too often, they stifle discussion and quash dissension on technical issues—a form of technical intimidation.
>
> During the flight to Mars there were early warning signs that something was wrong in the trajectory analysis, but the navigation team wouldn't listen. When problems were pointed out they essentially said, "Trust us. We're the experts." Due to a software error, the spacecraft entered too low in the Martian atmosphere and consequently burnt up. This was foreseeable during the flight and could have been corrected, but we caved in to the insistence of the navigation team that everything would be all right. That's technological rankism.
>
> A similar dynamic is well documented in the shuttle disasters. Prior to the *Challenger* flight, . . . engineers had warned that the unusually low temperature [in Florida the night before the launch] could be a problem for the O-rings. In this case, pressure by management to launch on time silenced engineering concerns. This wasn't technological rankism; rather, it was garden-variety managerial rankism that led to one of our most vivid national disasters.
>
> The *Columbia* accident investigation report shows a similar phenomenon: "As what the board calls an 'informal chain of command' began to shape [the flight's] outcome, location in the structure empowered some to speak and silenced others."

These incidents, Dr. Hinners concluded, show that rankism can have lethal consequences.

Examples of rankism at the corporate level have been making headlines since the Enron collapse. Usually, they take the form of high-ranking executives enriching themselves at the expense of employees, shareholders, and lenders. But as the following instance makes clear, corporate rankism can kill.

After *Somebodies and Nobodies* appeared in print, people in the nuclear power business wrote to me about the rankist culture they saw in their industry, worried that if it wasn't changed, a disaster was inevitable. In the fall of 2005 the *New York Times* ran a story that supported their fears.[2] It reported that employees at the Salem nuclear power station, near Salem, New Jersey, were reluctant to express concerns about safety because they were afraid of retaliation from their superiors.

Experts in the field warn that the rankist culture that pervades the nuclear industry poses a far graver risk to public safety than do the nuclear reactors themselves. Tish B. Morgan, with Booz Allen Hamilton, is an expert on nuclear power who has more than thirty years of experience in nuclear licensing and regulatory issues, safety analysis, and advanced reactor design. In a recent conversation, she stated categorically that "rankism was the primary factor in what could have been America's worst nuclear disaster." She began her account with the accident at Three Mile Island and then went on to describe an even more serious near-meltdown at the Davis-Besse nuclear plant near Toledo, Ohio, in 2002.

> In 1979, just twelve days after the movie *The China Syndrome* came out, an accident at Three Mile Island seemed to be an example of life imitating art. During the several-day course of the crisis, rankism revealed itself in several forms—corporate rankism (which gave priority to profits over safety procedures), technological rankism (hands-on operators bowing to outside nuclear "experts" who, it was later learned, were actually mistaken in their analysis), and regulatory rankism, wherein "desk-jockeys" from the all-powerful Nuclear Regulatory Commission took control of the moment-to-moment operation of the plant and proceeded to make a bad situation far

worse. Catastrophe was averted in the nick of time. But without rankism there would have been no incident and no stain on the reputation of the nuclear industry.

For more than twelve years, the management at the Davis-Besse plant dictated shortcuts and hurry-ups to keep it running (and thus making money). The result, discovered by accident during an oft-postponed inspection, was a rust hole caused by chronic leakage of boric acid into the reactor vessel head. Because management allowed only a preset number of hours for removing the acid, it had accumulated over time. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission later estimated that if the plant had continued to run without intervention, it would have suffered a meltdown within two to thirteen months.

Why, at Davis-Besse, did employees who had reported problems for years in the end just go along with what they believed to be unsafe operations? The answer is rankism, pure and simple, as in, "You do what I say, or else your replacement will."

The company, whose rankist practices almost gave us another Chernobyl, passed the costs of the near-meltdown—$800 million for a new vessel head and replacement power for the two years the plant was shut down for repairs—on to consumers. In addition, the parent corporation—FirstEnergy Nuclear Operating Company—has been identified as being primarily responsible for the wide-scale Midwest/Canadian blackout of August 14, 2003. Bowing to rankist orders, instead of disconnecting from the grid and trying to stabilize their own system, workers took other utility systems down with them. The economic impact of the blackout reached into the billions.

This chapter concludes with the mention of two very different, but no less deadly, forms of rankism: imperious fundamentalism and environmental depredation.When fundamentalist proselytizers, convinced that their doctrine bears the stamp of higher authority, adopt a superior stance toward nonbelievers, that's rankism. Fundamentalism's most familiar face is that of "true believers" who claim to know what's right for everybody. An extreme form of this is the kind of crusade or jihadism that those targeted call terrorism.

But fundamentalism has many faces. Others include scientific fundamentalism and its bullying insistence on the preeminence of purely technological considerations, and political fundamentalism, with its paternalistic certainty that it knows the needs of others better than they do. Other varieties of fundamentalism will be discussed in chapter 9.

Rankism's reach also extends to the environment—an arena in which rankist presumptions now threaten the very health of our planet. As creatures who exercise "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth,"[3] will we continue to sanction environmental degradation, or will we assume the role of responsible stewards? Will we exercise our "dominion" over animals in a manner that recognizes that they, too, are entitled to a measure of dignity, or will we tolerate their abuse and exploitation? Our responses to these questions hinge on our attitude toward rankism.[4]

A Way Out?

The issue at hand is not the seriousness of the problems humanity now faces—upon which most agree—but rather whether reframing them in a dignitarian perspective can give us new leverage in resolving them. The following chapters will show that building a dignitarian society by targeting rankism can indeed be an effective way to deal with the challenges confronting us. But first we need to take a closer look at human dignity and what form a movement to secure it might take.

this material has been excerpted from

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by Robert W. Fuller
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