

HAS LITTERING REPLACED BASEBALL AS THE
NATIONAL PASTIME?

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PINE BLUFFS – You’ve probably noticed it too. Trash seems to be everywhere! Along the shoulders of our highways and roads, on our sidewalks, our front lawns, and in the alleys behind our houses – not to mention the streams and rivers cluttered with bald tires, discarded metal containers, bottles, jars and cans.

The other day I decided to leave the car home and stroll over to the mall. You see, I’m a reformed type A. Impressed with all the talk about taking time to smell the roses, I wanted a few minutes to enjoy my beautiful neighborhood close-up; to *really see and appreciate* what’s all around me. Well, *trash* is all around me. Lots of it. Crushed beer cans, empty fast-food containers, Styrofoam coffee cups, napkins, plastic rings from soft-drink packs, and cigarette butts complete with filter tips. What a mess!

The next day a friend asked me, “What is wrong with America?” He probably didn’t expect an answer, but I gave him one anyway.

“Trash,” I said, poking him in the chest with my finger.

“Huh?”

“That’s right. Trash. *That’s* what’s wrong with America.”

He thought about it for a few seconds. Then his lip curled and he edged away from me, his eyes focused on a spot down the block, mumbling something about being late for a meeting. That didn’t faze me one bit. I was just warming up.

“Our neighborhoods are filled with trash,” I continued, addressing anyone within earshot. “Littering seems to have surpassed baseball as the great American pastime. I’ve heard

we're a '*throw-away society*' but this is ridiculous. People are getting carried away."

Well, it's true. If you don't believe me, conduct a little test of your own. Walk down any alley in town. You'll find everything you can imagine in there; ancient refrigerators, stoves, mattresses, box springs, broken bicycles, stacks of newspapers, ruined televisions, discarded baby carriages, toys, and even black plastic bags filled with leaves from last summer. You name it. It's there. It seems no one has any pride in his or her neighborhoods. The practice of a Saturday morning drive over to the local landfill has gone the way of the evening walk in the park. Nobody does it these days.

A few years ago in my former home city of Baltimore, there was a movement to clean up. It was called "*Pitch In*." Trash containers were placed on the street corners. A sign on each invited people to toss their trash into the container. Well, it seems the "Pitch In" campaign was widely ignored. Either that or the people around there had lousy aim. The trash containers are still there, but they stand mostly empty while trash litters the area around each receptacle. What is it that people don't like about trash cans?

When I was a kid back in high school we had a "police the area" drill once each week. For fifteen minutes every Friday afternoon before school closed, home-room teacher led their classes out of the building and into a designated area where we picked up empty soda bottles, discarded cigarette butts, food wrappers and Popsicle sticks. Every piece of rubbish we could find was collected and tossed into trash cans. This was more than an exercise in trash removal. It helped to instill in us a feeling of pride in our school. It also taught humility and the ability to empathize with others less fortunate than ourselves. And, our school grounds were litter-free!

Why isn't that done any more? Because some parents, missing the point, complained that Johnny is in school to do more *important* things than pick up trash. So our tax money is spent on janitors and grounds keepers, but the job still isn't getting done. If you doubt that,

drive over to the local high school this weekend. You'll see for yourself.

You're skeptical! I can tell you don't think the problem is that serious. Okay. Try these statistics for starters. In the City of Baltimore a few years ago, crews from the Bureau of Solid Waste picked up 750 tons of household trash, 1,300 tons of mixed paper, and 350 tons of bottles, cans and plastics every day. Each month, sanitation crews hit a different section of town, labeled "hot zones," where they picked up 1,200 tons of trash. Still, according to frustrated officials, it's not enough. The problem has become so serious that a member of a citizen's activist group which routinely cleans neighborhood streets of trash said, "The rats are now traveling in schools. Not singly or in pairs, but in schools." Trash is both expensive and unhealthy. And Baltimore isn't the only city with this problem.

Yesterday, driving to work, I got behind a woman motorist. Well-groomed, hair pulled back in a bun, she was dressed for success in a black pants suit complete with shoulder pads, a red blouse and a white silk scarf tied around her neck. Classy! And she was driving a car that clearly said she'd arrived. As I watched, she rolled down her window and flicked a cigarette out. Apparently her expensive automobile wasn't equipped with an ashtray. Or maybe her arms weren't long enough to reach it. At the next traffic signal, she seemed to be searching for something. As the light changed, she rolled the window down again and tossed out an empty cigarette pack. It landed next to my car. Virginia Slims. Well, at least the inside of her car was litter-free.

Yes, as the ad used to say, "*you've come a long way, baby!*" There was a time when we respected our own property and the property of our neighbors. We did not think lightly about littering. Now, without a moment's hesitation, we simply drop it where we stand. Or where we ride. Will we ever learn?

Even animals don't foul their own nests. Only Man does that. It's true that we're a

higher order of being, capable of rational thought and action. But sometimes we're a bit . . . forgetful. So now we can stand at the bus stop every morning and count the partially-smoked cigarettes and cork filter tips half hidden in the grass. Super cool. Gives us something to do while we're waiting for that bus. Anyone recall the river out in the mid-west that burned a few years ago when someone got too close with a lighted match? Wow! That must have really been something to see!

We hear lots of talk about how far America has progressed as a nation. We can send a man to the moon, build a hydrogen bomb, and store drinking water in reservoirs behind dams hundreds of feet high, but we can't keep our neighborhoods free of trash. We can board a swept-wing, needle nose plane and fly from Washington to Paris in just a few hours, but cleaning our local streams of discarded flotsam and jetsam seems beyond us.

Can anything be done to stop people from littering? Some experts say we need more anti-littering laws and stiffer penalties. But most communities have had laws like that on the books for years. Others throw up their hands and look the other way. Still others say we can't legislate morality. They don't understand. This is not merely a moral issue, although a sound moral argument against littering could be made if one tried. It's primarily a question of *civic duty*. Ideas like cleanliness, pride in one's community, and respect for property – our own and that of others – are matters of both virtue and good citizenship.

Yes! there is something we can do over the long haul to help the problem disappear. First, each of us needs to resolve not to litter and to pick up after ourselves, to make certain we don't add to the problem. Second, let's talk to our school boards and tell them that we, as parents, want them to re-institute into the curriculum from K to Twelve the idea that children must respect property; their own and other people's property. This is a positive step that will instill in kids a sense of civic responsibility, pride in their surroundings, and a feeling of

belonging within their community. It was in the curriculum once. It can be put in there again.

It may take five years or more. But if respect for property is again taught in our schools, it won't be long before the sight of a group of teens depositing empty pizza boxes and pop bottles at the curb as they head for home after school will be a thing of the past. Nor will we ever again have to read about a group of local kids beating up another kid for his or her running shoes.

If we all "pitch in," our reservoirs, rivers and streams can soon be trash-free, thus insuring that much of our drinking water will be cleaner. Our kids will be more respectful of the property rights of others, and our yards, alleys, and streets will look a lot better, too.

Anthony Joseph Sacco, Sr., a licensed private investigator, writer, and author of two novels; [The China Connection](#), and [Little Sister Lost](#), holds degrees from Loyola College of Maryland and the University of Maryland Law School. His articles have appeared in [The Baltimore Sun](#), [Voices for the Unborn](#), [the Catholic Review](#), [WREN Magazine](#) and [the Wyoming Catholic Register](#). E-mail him at anthonyjsacco@hotmail.com and visit his website at www.saccoservices.com.