Comment

The American Giant

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Mr. Peter G. Peterson, Assistant to the President for International Economic Affairs and frequently called the President’s “economic Kissinger,” must be credited at least with candor when he recently stated: “I believe we must dispel any ‘Marshall Plan psychology’ or relatively unconstrained generosity that may remain. This is not just a matter of choice but of necessity.” In a hungry world, unfortunately, an American imperial policy of unmitigated self-interest is not made more morally palatable by the candor with which it is proclaimed. Mr. Peterson’s recommendations would remove the ethical linepin of the Jewish-Christian tradition (and of the American experience at its best), namely, the belief that the rich are accountable to the poor and the strong to the weak. As “idealistic” as they may seem, it is the better part of realism to recognize that such ideals are an essential ingredient in holding together the experiment that is American society.

G.K. Chesterton once noted that America is the only society in the world that is based upon a creed. His point has been expanded by thoughtful foreign observers from Alexis de Tocqueville to Gunnar Myrdal. American peoplehood cannot be taken for granted; peoplehood for us is a social and a moral construction. Americans are a people on purpose and a people by purpose. Central to the American creed is the belief that we are a generous people, that our social experiment is undertaken for more than our own benefit. To be sure, American morality has often degenerated into self-righteousness, and our “generosity” frequently is a disguise for our exploitation of other peoples. America’s “manifest destiny” has been, to say the least, a mixed blessing for the world, as the people of Indochina would no doubt affirm. But the conclusion to be drawn from the distortions of America’s moral purpose in the past—as, for example, in its cold war version of “defending the free world”—is not that we should abandon moral purpose altogether. In the life of societies the only cure for a bad dream is a good dream. The present crisis in American life underscores the prophetic insight, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” When we accept the advice of professedly hard-nosed realists and give up even the pretensions of moral purpose for American power in the world, we invite the further unraveling of our society; then the nightmare of American life will begin in earnest.

In fairness to Mr. Peterson it should be noted that his unhappy statement of economic morality is but one of many current signs of regression. The disillusionment with foreign aid, some distortions of anti-war sentiment, and the calculated selfishness of much of the ecology movement all contribute to a public psychology not simply of isolationism but of insulation from the abiding moral challenge to make power accountable to human need. On foreign aid Senator Frank Church and others rightly protest the militarized “arsenal diplomacy” that disguises itself as humanitarian and developmental assistance. But, if it is true that we have, to use the biblical metaphor, been giving the hungry “stones instead of bread,” the solution is not to give them nothing, but to offer bread instead of stones. As for anti-war sentiment, those of us who have publicly opposed America’s war in Indochina since the early 1960’s are rightly convinced that we Americans must, for many years to come, examine the deeper lessons of that tragedy. One of the lessons of the Indochina war, however, is not that genocidal militarism is the only model of American power in its relation to the Third World. The sadness is that many world-weary Americans are so understandably nauseated by the war that they refuse to hear any more about international responsibilities. The sadness is that we have so botched the job of being our brother’s keeper that we will not even try to be our brother’s brother.

Certain aspects of the ecology movement manifest
the most insidious form of our current moral regression. "Why should we worry about hunger in Latin America when we haven't even cleaned up our own streams?" The logic of the question is a complete non sequitur, but it is seductively appealing nonetheless. Prophets of eco-catastrophe such as Paul Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin tell us that the reason for world poverty is that there are too many poor people. It is not our selfishness but their fertility that is to blame. Underdeveloped nations must be told that the revolution of rising aspirations has been called off. The beleaguered eco-system cannot support any more rich people, and maybe it cannot even support the poor in their wretchedness. From the company of the ecologically converted let the message go forth: The only purpose of American policy is "survival" and the preservation of our "quality environment." I got mine, Jack.

Such is the mindset of many U.S. environmentalists who have been instrumental in initiating and shaping the forthcoming U.N. Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. The success of that conference will depend on the effectiveness of Third World participants in making the passion for environmental protection accountable to the needs of underdeveloped countries. As 15,000 people starve to death each day on our common planet, revolutionaries in distant lands quote Jefferson and Lincoln and try to remember an America that promised to be a blessing rather than a curse to the nations of the world. Meanwhile, Gunnar Myrdal pleads (in The Challenge of World Poverty), "It is my firm conviction, founded upon study and reflection, that only by appealing to peoples' moral feelings will it be possible to create the popular basis for increasing aid to underdeveloped countries as substantially as is needed." But those in high places listen rather to counselors who would "dispel any 'Marshall Plan psychology' or relatively unconstrained generosity that may remain."

One hopes the remnants of generosity and the sense of accountability to the poor are greater than our leaders suspect, but one cannot be sure. The signs point to the emergence of an American giant. Not the "helpless giant" of President Nixon's fears, but a giant helping itself; greedy and grasping, misbegotten child of a once lively social experiment for which better men used to dream honorable dreams.