Waiting for a new image of America in the world

A Time Between Votes

William L. Bradley

With the coming of Jimmy Carter something ended, and something else began. As if to celebrate—however sadly—the end of an age, more than eight hundred surviving members of Roosevelt's New Deal recently gathered in Washington for a party. "We didn't want to wait another year," said one of the organizers of the occasion, "because some of these people won't be here then."

Those New Deal veterans—all but forgotten now—were celebrating the forty-fourth anniversary of Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration to the presidency. They were just about all that remained of a movement that had transformed every facet of American life and had prepared this nation for its leadership role in the middle years of the century. Four and a half decades is a long time for a philosophy of government to prevail, especially in a country as pragmatic as the United States. But endure it did, despite the efforts of countless conservatives to abort it. Even Eisenhower, Nixon, and Ford were managed by the New Deal institutions rather than the other way around. Richard Nixon recognized this reality when he declared, "We're all Keynesians now."

This year, rather than the fiftieth anniversary, which is still six years in the future, was an appropriate time for Roosevelt's loyal veterans to commemorate the founding of the New Deal, for clearly it has finally run its course. Much of Jimmy Carter's appeal during the presidential primaries lay in the fact that for the first time since 1933 America had a candidate who was running neither for nor against New Deal solutions to social problems. Carter promised not only zero-based budgeting of Federal bureaucracies but also a zero-based approach to what our world is all about. Our new president's implicit promise to make all things new will be hard to live up to. It is far easier to dress up old assumptions in new jargon that to put them aside for new ones, which are unfamiliar and untested. Clearly, however, he intends to begin anew.

Those of us who have spent most of our careers in the study and teaching of intercultural relations did not need Jimmy Carter to tell us that times have changed. Expanding needs and decreasing income have brought that lesson home to us. Even those of us on the funding side of the scale have known as much, for we have witnessed the growth of significant programs that cannot find the support necessary to their proper implementation. Why should this be the case? Why, when America has become the critical agent in international affairs, do non-governmental organizations find themselves in a desperate struggle to survive? Is it simply because the government and private foundations have let the clock run out on a short interest span and have turned their attention to other, more attractive projects? No doubt there is some truth in that, for foundations do prefer new partners to long marriages. But there is, I believe, a deeper reason.

We Americans have lost the visions of our national destiny, the visions that motivated our ancestors to conquer a new continent, slay the dragons of Europe and Asia, and spread the gospel of democracy to the darkest corners of the world. Without an energizing national vision we are reduced to mundane housekeeping. That such a renewed vision will come I have no doubt, but how and when and in what form I have no idea. All I can say is that it has always been the primary task of a nation's intellectuals to discern and articulate the ideology that bespeaks the spirit of the age. Perhaps because of our contemporary mistrust of ideology, perhaps out of sheer exhaustion from the conflicts of the sixties, that task is inadequately borne by today's intelligentsia.

Since President Carter has made it respectable for sophisticated people to speak publicly in religious terms, let me describe some of the images by which America has chosen to define itself during times past. Ours is a Judeo-Christian culture, which has secularized some very popular and powerful biblical images and has adapted them to our history. Within the span of my adult life there have been four such myths by which we have defined ourselves, all of them rooted in the Bible. The first is that we are God's

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chosen people; the second, that we are our brother's
keeper; the third, that we are members of a new heaven
and a new earth; and the fourth, that we are nothing more
than the miserable progeny of Adam, driven out of Eden
for our sins. The first image as the chosen people
classified America's picture of itself in the period
between the two world wars. The image of America as
our brother's keeper marked the Roosevelt view before
our entrance into World War II and the Marshall Plan
mentality thereafter. The secularized vision of a new
heaven and a new earth characterized the thinking of the
great mass of Americans at the founding of the United
Nations. The fourth vision, of a fallen nation in a fallen
world, expresses the national mood since Vietnam and
Watergate.

The first three images were positive, and whatever
their limitations they provided a dynamic for action and
participation in the world. But the fourth image is
negative and thus debilitating. So long as we see our-
selves in this fashion we shall have little to contribute to
intercultural relations.

Intercultural studies entail a polarity between our-
selves and others. Our perception of other peoples is
influenced by how we see ourselves. It makes a differ-
ence whether we see ourselves as a chosen people or as
the caretaker of the world's people or as a people without
distinctive sovereignty in a universal society or as a
nation incapable of doing good. It makes a difference to
us and to others. I suspect that the American public will
support intercultural programs and studies with more
enthusiasm when we have reached a new consensus on
whom we are as Americans and what our role should be
in the emerging world; when, that is, we have discovered
a new and convincing image of ourselves.

Consider the image of the chosen people. This vision
comes from the Old Testament story of the Exodus: For
you are a people holy to the Lord your God; for the Lord
your God has chosen you to be a people for his own
possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of
the earth (Deut. 7:6). It was with this conviction that the
Pilgrim fathers came to America, and immigrants since
have accepted this vision as their own.

How great an image it is for a persecuted people. And
how dangerous for the powerful! It energizes minorities
in America and provides the theme for the popular
liberation theologies in our seminaries. But when those
in the establishment believe themselves to be the chosen
people, they become arrogant, prejudiced, and oppres-
sive.

That's how it was in my childhood. Intercultural
relations were defined by an ethnic stereotyping that
would make even Archie Bunker blush today. Safely
sequestered in their comfortable enclaves, the children
of Anglo-Saxon ancestry learned at an early age to
assume their superiority over other ethnic stock, most of
whom were believed to have inferior genes and chromo-
somes.

The current nostalgia for the 1930's blurs the truth
about what a prejudiced, narrow-minded culture pre-
dominated in America between the wars. The most
popular recordings, radio programs, and films were
saturated with stereotypes far worse than those of "Mary
Hartman, Mary Hartman." To name a few: Jack Benny's
Rochester, Shirley Temple's Stepin Fetchit, the Two
Black Crows, Amos and Andy, Charlie Chan, Dr. Fu Manchu, Mr. Moto, Nick Parkyakakos, and the Greater Sinclair Minstrels.

Next, consider the image of our brother’s keeper. This speaks to the missionary impulse, which is so peculiarly American. Once again it is biblical. After Cain had slain his brother Abel the Lord said to Cain, “‘Where is Abel your brother?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’” (Gen. 4:9). And after Jesus’ resurrection he is reported to have instructed his disciples, “‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel unto all creation’” (Mark 16:15). Do good unto others, and tell them the great truth that has been revealed to you. Our secularized religion impelled us under the spell of this image to export the benefits of free enterprise and preach the gospel of American democracy to all mankind. From a condition of innocent prejudice we moved to a state of innocent goodwill.

After three decades of foreign assistance, two and a half decades of development, and millions of man-hours of technical assistance we slowly discovered that our little brothers didn’t want us, didn’t like us, and didn’t want to be like us. International brotherhood, we learned, has its own varieties of sibling rivalry, and big brother is seldom the object of everyone’s affection.

Our popular self-image of brother-bountiful seeking to help the world’s unfortunate was gratifying to us but not to our beneficiaries. In the form of intercultural studies it established too often an unequal relationship between the American researcher and the indigenous assistant, whose salaries were scaled accordingly. Even sophisticated social scientists with a macrointerest in a foreign culture displayed a microsensitivity to the nuances of that culture. And those who were indifferent to or contemptuous of the baggage of indigenous materialism too often became evangelists of American research methodology and impolitely brushed aside the traditional scholarship of indigenous seers.

We know now that the image of our brother’s keeper, while better than the paternalistic image of the white man’s burden, is dysfunctional in today’s world. Our fate is bound up with that of our brothers in other cultures, but the responsibility we bear toward them is more complex—and perhaps less burdensome—than we had imagined. Sometimes we serve their interest best by forbearance rather than by interference; and sometimes our first responsibility is to learn from them rather than to teach them.

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ook at the third image, that of the new heaven and a new earth; the dream that gave rise to the communes in nineteenth-century America, to the Mormons, to the abolitionists, and to the missionary and temperance movements. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away (Rev. 21:1). What an impressive image this becomes when articulated in a secularized political version. This was the Wilsonian vision of the League of Nations—magnificent and utopian. It was the vision of One World after the Second World War, when we hoped that the threat of atomic annihilation would force mankind to make a rational choice for world government. Despite the common belief a generation ago that nationalism was a nineteenth-century anachronism that could not survive in our postindustrial age, new nations are coming into being even now, and elsewhere nationalism is giving way to tribalism. The new age we dreamed about has taken on the image of a nightmare, with violence more rather than less common, and government-by-coup d'état no longer the exception.

The hope of a world order in which nations give up their sovereignty is no longer believable today. The shift from resource surpluses to shortages has only emphasized the impossibility—and for most Americans, I daresay, the undesirability—of the United States limiting its sovereignty in a truly international structure.

That leads us to the fourth image, which has its biblical counterpart in the story of Adam. Then the Lord God said, Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil...therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken (Gen. 3:22-23). This is the Hobbesian image of life, “‘mean, nasty, brutish, and short.’ And this is the controlling image in which America saw itself during the latter part of the sixties until the present time. It shows us to be the most miserable among the nations rather than the chosen people, fallen from our place of pride, and incapable of wielding justly the great power we possess.

There is no doubt that we need chastening for the willful and unconscious sins we have committed against others. The ill effects of our foreign policy miscalculations will long endure. It may be easier for those nations that suffered from our excessive use of force to forget than for us to forgive ourselves.

Yet a nation that pictures itself in so negative a manner lacks the dynamism required of it as an actor in world affairs. It will turn inward, lose its interest in other peoples and cultures, and shrivel up. Masochism no more befits a nation than a person.

I think people now yearn not only for solutions to our economic and social problems but for a new vision of what America can be in a world that is very new in the opportunities it offers and the material limitations it now imposes. There are many exciting current opportunities in intercultural, international relations. The knowledge explosion is remarkably enhanced by the technical capabilities of the electronics revolution. We Americans move about our world with a new humility and a new capacity to listen rather than to preach, to receive as well as to give. The federal government now appears to be more open to the needs of others than it has in the recent past, and private resources for funding international programs are developing in newly affluent countries. Midst the general gloom in international affairs what more promising portent of brighter things to come can there be than the recent election in India? But finally the question is what we are going to do about ourselves, how we are going to think of ourselves.

Today we are in a time between the times. We can only await the discovery of a new image of America that will enable us to define our present role among the cultures of the world.