

UNDER COVER

National Greatness and Other Fallacies

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National greatness is much in demand this year. Mr. Reagan suggests that we have lost it and that he will get it back. Mr. Carter argues that we still have it and that he will preserve it. Both agree, in any case, that we *were* great and that we can *be* great. The only dispute is about the present. Finley Peter Dunne's characters would have felt at home in 1980. "We're a great country," Mr. Hennessey once proclaimed, and Mr. Dooley agreed. "That we are, Hennessey, that we are. And the best of it is, we know we are."

But, to ask the obvious question: What makes a country great? Mr. Reagan's answer, predictably, is simple enough: A nation is great when it is rich and powerful. Mr. Reagan proposes, by a rather wacky set of economic measures, to restore prosperity and put everyone to work (though some workers, to be sure, would get less than the minimum wage). He pledges to increase military spending and then get tough with the Russkies and various Third World nuisances. Certainly, unlike President Carter, he will not "do nothing."

To Americans, whose recent lives have been shaped by the decline of American power, these are appealing goals. Mr. Reagan understands the mood of an audience, and he has the distinct advantage of taking his schemes seriously. Even if his programs made sense, however, the ends he hopes for do not constitute greatness in human beings or in nations.

AVARICE AND ANXIETY

Reduced to its essence, Mr. Reagan's vision amounts to an adolescent's dreamworld of a somewhat dated sort, a political version of *Grease*. "Greatness" exists when you are the toughest kid in school and when you own the snazziest and fastest car— free, of course, from all emission controls. We are probably fortunate that Mr. Reagan did not ask John Travolta to run for vice-president.

Of course America should try to be strong in order effectively to defend itself and to pursue its interests. But it is not "great" to pursue one's interests any more than it is great to defend oneself. Quite the contrary. These are radically mediocre ideals, a shopkeeper's morals combining avarice with anxiety. Similarly, Mr. Reagan is right that all Americans should have work, but a society in which all people work is not necessarily great. It has only reached the level of ordinary social policy. The Soviet Union, after all, keeps people at work pretty well. Full employment is a desirable goal, but before a polity can claim to be great, it must find work for its people that is dignified in its terms and its products. Great societies provide great work.

In his acceptance speech Mr. Reagan quoted Franklin Roosevelt's invitation to a "rendezvous with destiny." Comparing Reagan and Roosevelt is a form of *lèse magistère*, but it can teach us something. FDR's theme in 1936 was more than the quest for peace and prosperity. He was calling on America to master the "economic royalists," envisioning an economic life in which compassion and human concern would rule in place of a cold and soulless pursuit of products and profit. Roosevelt, in other words, was seeking to subject our private greed to our public convictions, and in broad terms to subordinate power to love. Roosevelt's vision had its own illusions and distortions, but the greatness he hoped for was genuine, a flawed emerald but an emerald nonetheless.

I doubt that America ever *was* a truly "great country." America has made great promises to its citizens, and they have been happy so long as those promises were credible. Our life has been shaped and governed by the requirements of growth and change. We have taught ourselves to accept shabby things because change would make them obsolescent, just as we embraced the automobile so ardently because it gave us mobility. America promised to *be* promising, to offer us a shining future. But the promise of great things later on is not greatness but, at best, an anticipation of it. Mr. Reagan's adolescent imagery touches something fundamental in us: Adolescence is the last time when all possibilities seem open and nothing is foreclosed. That, in fact, is the sole source of our frequent nostalgia for adolescence, an otherwise dreadful time of life. Adulthood trades infinite possibility for finite actuality, fantasy pleasure for real ones.

WHO GOVERNS?

In this sense America has never "come of age." We have not accepted limited actuality, which is to say that we have not accepted the nature of things, polities, or humankind. Until we do we cannot be great. Political greatness does not consist in daydreaming but in great citizens and in great political life. We clutch at our freedom to do as we will, like children in perennial rebellion against authority. However, as D.H. Lawrence observed in *Studies in Classical American Literature*, the great are not masterless but "mastered," governed by a truth greater than the self. In the world of 1980, political greatness begins with following that truth.

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