Ronald Reagan's inaugural was, as an aide described it, "vintage Reagan." It was, in other words, vague, muddled, and well meaning—a pastiche of slogans and rather mawkish patriotic sentiment. Wall Street did not like it, regretting Reagan's failure to refer to specific policies and programs. By contrast, James Reston affected to admire the speech, perhaps because he could read his own meanings into it. Despite Reagan's lack of specificity, however, the address does point to themes and moods that may characterize the new administration.

Mr. Reagan invited us to an "era of national renewal" in which great and heroic deeds would be required—a challenge that would seem to call for sacrifice and the higher virtues. Reagan, however, sounded no such trumpet. Only once did he refer to the "price" we will have to pay, and then his purpose was to assure us that no group will pay a "higher price" than any other. He told us that we are all right just as we are and that we are already heroic enough.

Heroism, in Mr. Reagan's view, is not a very exacting virtue. Its demands are satisfied by trying to create "wealth and opportunity," paying your taxes, and living a decent private life. The great advocates of capitalism, by contrast, never thought these bourgeois virtues heroic. Quite the contrary. They recognized that what is virtue for the middle class—prudent avarice and moderate self-seeking—is, by more exalted standards, a petty form of vice, "private mischief" that can only be justified if it leads to "public benefit." The founders of capitalist theory, in fact, hoped to dispense with the "vainglories" of heroism, substituting bourgeois calculation for heroic exaltation. Mr. Reagan, on the other hand, appears to believe that private decencies are equivalent to public virtue. In this he follows a familiar Republican path, but one which, as Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick wrote in 1979, debases the public good as an ideal. Reagan is not calling on us to raise our private standards; he is asking us to lower our public ones.

Mr. Reagan was explicit, of course, in urging that the government be reduced in size and importance. But telling us that government is the "problem," implies that we are not the problem. Our dreams, hopes, and goals, Reagan assured us, will guide the administration. These dreams include a "revived economy," and Mr. Reagan promised us that we will have work and a share of the "bounty." And, Reagan was quick to assure us, there will be "compassion" and social programs to help Americans who are sick, who "fall," or who lack equal opportunity. There will, in other words, be something for everyone at almost no cost.

Government is the problem, Reagan's address suggests, when it asks us to set limits to our private ambition or when it calls us to sacrifice for the public good. In one of the few specific allusions of his speech, Reagan criticized "a tax system which penalizes successful achievement." Implicitly, Reagan was attacking the graduate income tax, intruding the right-wing ideology that, in general, he sought to mute or avoid. But that remark reflected his deeper conviction. The public good, as Reagan understands it, is only an aggregate of private goods, and he hopes for an America in which we all live our separate lives affluently, not one in which we live the good life in common.

Small wonder, then, that Reagan's address did not refer to the social concerns that moved so many of his supporters. He did not mention the family or the moral order, and he referred to the states but not to local communities. The disintegrating world of our personal relationships, the decline of faith, and the tendency to moral anarchy—all these Reagan ignored, except to suggest that we pray on inauguration day. To reconstruct the family, friendship, and community, to say nothing of religion, would require government policies to strengthen our relationships, and, by implication at least, to limit our individual freedom to do as we wish. Mr. Reagan's devotion to individualism is too great for that, it appears. And he limits himself to the hope that everything will work out if the government will leave things alone. Our situation is worse than that, however. Families, churches, and communities do not need to be left alone; they need to be helped to combat the fragmenting forces that govern secular life. On this point Mr. Reagan's inaugural is whistling in the graveyard.

At some level Mr. Reagan knows it. He assured us that we are not "doomed to an inevitable decline," but the fear haunts his speech. He paraphrased Winston Churchill, saying that he did not intend to preside "over the dissolution of the world's strongest economy." Yet Mr. Reagan must know that the British empire, which Mr. Churchill pledged to preserve, is no longer with us. Churchill's intentions were not potent, even when allied with brilliance and statecraft against the forces making for Britain's decline. In likening his intent to Churchill's, Reagan was suggesting, however unconsciously, the dark forebodings that hide under his Pollyanna commonplaces.

To face the real challenges that confront America Mr. Reagan will have to do more than paraphrase Churchill. He will have to understand, as Churchill did, that genuine sort of heroism which elevates private life to the level of public vision.