In my part of the country, an investment firm treats us to two television ads in which its president celebrates the vision and determination that built American greatness and offers to help us invest in small and mid-sized “emerging growth companies” which manifest the old spirit. He may have the gift of Midas, but not of Clio; both of the symbols he invokes—the Erie Canal and the Grand Coulee Dam—were public projects, funded by taxes and carried out by government. This executive trusts that the common good today will result from private entrepreneurs pursuing personal profit, but the canal and the dam reflect the conviction that public policy is the foundation of private fortune. He wants to stand in a tradition that does not match his prescription; he values the signs but mistakes their meaning.

Mr. Reagan has the same problem. His State of the Union address urged Americans to feel a mawkish smugness, basking in heartwarming anecdotes and pointing with pride to his administration’s achievements, real or reputed. Mr. Reagan eschewed hard choices and sacrifices, at least until December, when he will have something to say about taxes. Most of us are safe in our lives and properties. For the moment at least we can enjoy our considerable comforts in (heavily armed) peace, and Mr. Reagan reckons that we will not quarrel with the results or worry about the troubling currents beneath the surface.

He may be right, as recent polls suggest. Yet the president’s image of America is literally dispirited: He sees the flesh of the body politic but not its soul.

Even leaving the spirit of the law aside, Mr. Reagan is sometimes shaky about the letter. In his State of the Union, the president referred to foreign policy in terms that were vague, relentlessly optimistic, and generally pacific. He professed to see “progress” and “hope” in Lebanon, though he was too canny to say how much, and he referred to Central America only by invoking the late Senator Henry Jackson. But his speech did contain one striking remark: Mr. Reagan told us that national defense is the “prime responsibility” of the government. The Constitution makes no such assertion. Mr. Reagan’s notion does not derive from that text but from the doctrine which is the foundation of his political creed.

The framers of the American Constitution held that human beings are radically self-seeking, caught up in a conflict with nature and with one another, and that they create government only to escape from the “state of war” that is virtually indistinguishable from the “state of nature.” So far their principles accord with Reagan’s: Government exists, at bottom, to protect our lives and liberties against attack. But the framers would have recognized that the teaching that national defense is government’s “prime responsibility” mirrors Machiavelli’s maxim that “the prince should have no other concern but war.” Congratulating the Los Angeles Raiders after the Superbowl, Mr. Reagan could think of no better compliment than likening the team to weapons of war. And even in the softer and more coherent tones of the State of the Union, he spoke of expansion—economic growth and our “next frontier” in space—before turning to our “traditional values” at home.

The framers regarded protecting us from one another—and hence domestic order—as the first concern of the regime. Moreover, they were constrained to respect the religious and classical side of American culture, which teaches that human beings are not only created with rights but under law, naturally social and political animals whose chief end is not to protect the body but to uplift the soul. That older tradition reminds us that domesticity takes precedence over what is foreign: The word foreign derives from the Latin for “out of doors,” and makes no sense unless one has a home, just as national defense is meaningless to those who have no country.

Reflecting ancient wisdom as well as their own newer theories, the language of the framers gives political community and justice priority over foreign policy in the order of national purposes. The Preamble to the Constitution refers to the need for a more perfect union, for justice, and for domestic tranquility before it mentions the common defense. The framers themselves may not have agreed with that ranking. It would not be the first time that what is written is wiser than what is thought, just as what is said is ordinarily more decent than what is felt. The letter of the Constitution, nevertheless, implies that Americans are a covenanted people, committed to put union and justice before safety and material well-being.

Justice and political community remind Americans of all those discomforting problems that Mr. Reagan’s uncouthness slighted or ignored in his State of the Union. Many of our fellow citizens are not our fellows in any real sense: Unemployment is massive and understated; cities continue to decay; crime is pervasive and—as terms like the “underground economy” suggest—often sanitized into respectability; our farms and countryside are being cannibalized; and we suffer from a moral order that sacrifices all our social relationships to individualism and our public obligations to private liberties.

Mr. Reagan called attention to our wealth and power without recognizing that these achievements, along with our lukewarm decencies, condemn us.

And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted into heaven, shall be brought down to hell: For if the mighty works which are done in thee had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for thee [Matthew 12:33].

Even if one gave Mr. Reagan all the credit he claims—which is dubious in relation to the economy, and ludicrous in relation to foreign policy—he has convicted himself of more important failings as a political leader.