



Time for America

MANY believe that time has run out on America, that the leading wave of history has begun to pass us by. Drawing analogies between the current state of America and the declining phases of previous cultures, these fatalists believe that we are destined to live out some theory of inevitable cycles or repetitions in history. They locate somewhere in our past a point at which America reached its pinnacle and began its decline. America's fate, however, has not been sealed by any historical imperative. Men *make* history through creating, witnessing, and recording significant deeds and events. History has not abandoned America; on the contrary, Ameri-

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cans have abandoned their place in history.

At one time, our forebears looked almost exclusively to the past for guidance. Mythical events that had happened in earlier times provided unchanging paradigms for individual and social actions. Having limited knowledge of the world and their place in it, these ancestors did not seek to study or understand history. Instead, they followed what they felt were sacred ways of thinking and acting. In contrast, one of the hallmarks of American thought is our rejection of such deterministic views of historical precedence.

In keeping with our rational, empirical bent, we pore over artifacts, classify them, and then devise various theories to explain their existence and significance. However, our

scientific evaluations of the past cannot be truly accurate, for we cannot know all of the variables that shaped the events and artifacts we study. Moreover, we carry to our studies of history the situations and forces acting on us today and, as a result, tend to fill in gaps in our knowledge by projecting these situations and forces into the past. Through such projection we actually *create* historical models for current problems and experiences. In effect, we have reversed the earlier view of the past as a repository of sacred paradigms. Rather than use the past to guide the present, we use the present to discover meaning in the past.

Because we can neither retrieve complete information about the past nor fully comprehend the information we do have, history lies open to divergent interpretation. Our widely educated populace, schooled in the veracity of scientific investigation, can understand and accept multiple interpretations of history. Hence, the past becomes a mutable area of theoretical study rather than a fixed template for human experience. This multiplicity of equally valid interpretations brings into question the embracing of any particular pattern of ideals or principles stemming from the past and, therefore, leads Americans to look to the ongoing present for personal and social guidance, as well as for historical understanding.

The mercurial present, though, provides little stability upon which to found guiding ideals. Eschewing the significance of time-honored meanings and portents, we constantly scan the present for events and situations of such import that they can be used to direct our thoughts and actions. This continual search for meaning has resulted in, to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth, "a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies." As has often been pointed out, the media satisfy this "craving" by treating us to a diet rich in sensationalistic, often titillating, events and crises. That these sensations are in many cases non-events that have been inflated through media hype is common knowledge.

A Glut of Information

With no enduring standard(s) by which to judge significance, we feel uncertain despite our wealth of facts; so we demand more information, which the media readily supply. Of course, it is also to the advantage of television, radio, and other hourly or daily news media to emphasize recent events because one of these media's most highly touted features is the ability to communicate information rapidly—they are anxious to bring us the latest news.

This steady stream of current facts (as well as attendant background

studies, personality profiles, historical comparisons, human interest stories, critical commentary, and other related reports) provides so many bits of information that current events seem to pass in slow motion and are thereby transformed into an ever-changing, ever-relevant, contemporaneous history. But as views that held great sway one day become erroneous or meaningless the next, this ephemeral history proves an unreliable guide, leaving us isolated in the present without reliable means for organizing the glut of specific, factual information heaped on us daily.

As we project current views and events into the past in our search for historical precedents, we encounter another major stumbling block to our understanding of history. Due to a number of factors, primarily our increased knowledge of the physical world and our inflated material affluence, we have a distorted grasp of large numbers. Where once hundreds and thousands were thought great, millions and billions are now tossed about casually. Historical and geological time tables, which often span thousands and millions of years, are regularly compressed into frameworks we can readily comprehend, such as the lengths of an hour, a day, or a single year. Such compression presents a false, greatly speeded-up view of history. Thus, events that took decades and centu-

ries in the past become analogized to monthly and yearly situations in the present, leading to further distortion of history and reality.

Limited Vision

Focused on the present and deluded in our understanding of history, we attempt to fine tune international developments, economic indicators, social structures, personal happiness, and as many facets of our lives as possible within too small a time frame. In responding to and effecting changes within inordinately short periods of time, we are like the hypochondriac who, feeling not quite right, first takes a laxative to loosen his bowels and then must take paregoric to bind them again. As one quick fix follows another, the body is thrust to extremes with no chance of attaining equilibrium. Such instability creates further alarm until soon the sufferer becomes fixated on panaceas and miracle cures. Intent only on the present, we too readily adopt any measure, no matter how hasty and superficial it may be, so long as it promises immediate gratification with little or no investment on our part. What we find, of course, is that we get what we pay for.

Alienated from the past and finding no stability in the present, we lose hope for the future. Our fixation on instant palliatives has so absorbed our time and resources that

we have all but ceased to look beyond what is immediately facing us. When we stop planning for and investing in a bright future, as much American industry and many individual Americans have done, we eventually arrive in a present that is beset with genuine crises, a sense of entropy, and widespread personal despair.

To curb our frantic, ill-conceived reactions to events of the moment, to redeem our future, we must redefine and reassert ideals that will provide America with guiding tenets for understanding and action. Such rededication to ideals does not imply a renunciation of facts and specifics in favor of metaphysical or abstract concepts. Rather, it is a reassertion of the healthy relationship between particulars and abstractions, the world of sensations and the world of ideas.

Abstractions and Specifics

Specifics embody abstractions, thereby giving ideals a form that can be perceived—seen, heard, felt, smelled, tasted—in the actual world of experience. In turn, abstractions are needed to relate and give meaning to the sea of individual specifics. Through a reassessment of fundamental American ideals, we can regenerate our past, investing it with particular meaning and significance. Establishing and promoting our stand on these ideals will allow

us to make sense of the specific facts and events of the present and to project a defined course of action into the future.

The obvious problem in reasserting American ideals is determining just what these ideals are and what priorities they have among themselves. Our pluralistic society affords Americans the right to aspire to numerous, divergent ideals. Consequently, rather than pressuring for national adoption of any one set of these ideals, we must revitalize our overarching commitment to the freedom of the individual to pursue his or her own chosen beliefs and tenets.

Such an assertion of individual freedom must look beyond our current, reductive interpretation of individual as self. Increasingly, our temporal isolation in the present has been accompanied by a spiritual isolation of the self. With quickening pace the ideal of the free individual united with other free individuals in a government designed to govern least has been usurped by an ethic of the dominant self among other dominant selves each seeking to advance his or her personal cause(s) while restricting the freedoms of others. In the self-centered, dog-eat-dog milieu created by this change, many Americans have sought through the extension and proliferation of governmental control to legislate the sense of solidarity and se-

curity previously generated through private, yet mutual, dedication to shared ideals.

Restrictions on the Individual

As the government has gained in authority, individuals have felt increasingly threatened and helpless in the face of restrictions sponsored by others; consequently, more powers have been deeded to the government to restrain these others, and the situation has escalated. We must break this cycle of repression by demanding not only our own personal freedom but, more importantly, the freedom of other persons—all who can exercise their individual freedom in compromise with the individual freedom of others.

The key word here is *compromise*. When a neighbor runs his power tools, cuts his grass with a power mower, has a party, or engages in any one of a number of noisy activities while I am working, I get annoyed, even mad. My impulse is to find some way to silence him, to prevent him from ever making such noise again. He is violating my freedom to silence. Of course, when I use my power tools, mow my yard, or whatever, I don't feel the same way—why, they're my tools, my lawn, etc.; I should have the freedom to do whatever I wish on my own property. As for myself, I would like it if he had to be silent and I could do whatever I wished when I wished.

Yet, I realize that to preserve my freedom to act, I must not just grudgingly allow, but actively affirm, his freedom to act also. Occasionally, he impinges on my freedom and, occasionally, I on his; in this way we both remain free to pursue our individual interests.

Now, if my neighbor's individual interests ran to raising hogs, rebuilding engines, or opening a skeet shooting range, I would not affirm his freedom to do so. Neither would most of our other neighbors. None of my neighbors, however, acts with such selfish disregard for others. On an individual level, despite our differences, we all get along fine. The fact is that most people get along just fine on an individual level. It is to this individual level that I think we must go to reawaken the spirit of American freedom.

We must reassess how much of our freedom and wealth we wish to place under governmental control. In making this reassessment, we should recognize that when we call upon the government to regulate the activities of others, we are oiling machinery that can serve to repress our own freedoms as well. We should also remember that such repression is not unknown in America. From witch hunts to lynchings to persecution campaigns, America has a history of sporadic, yet virulent, attacks on the freedom of the individual. Therefore, we must decide ex-

actly where our loyalties lie; upon what fundamental set of ideals will we base our understanding, actions, and dreams—on the American ideal of individual freedom or on some other ideal(s) that will necessitate the suppression of our rights and privileges.

The American experiment in individual freedom and democracy has not outlived its time. Everywhere, people have sought and are still seeking the rights and freedoms we enjoy. Not all, however, do seek such ends; in fact, many prefer some form of master/slave, ruler/subject relationship that maintains their chosen system of ideals. We have always stood virtually alone in our

national commitment to the ideal of individual freedom. To preserve the option of this freedom in an often hostile world, we must each promote individual freedom for ourselves and others. With the material and educational development of the Third World, many may soon be afforded an opportunity to experience greater individual freedom than they have ever known. By reasserting the autonomy of the individual on the national and international levels, America can retain its vanguard position in history. Rather than being a time of inevitable dissolution and decay, now—perhaps more than ever—is the time for American ideals. ⊕

In Defense of the Individual

WE ARE BORN into a family and a community. An immense social heritage is put at our disposal—a storehouse into which has been distilled the contributions of an enormous number of individual men and women, some famous and some nameless. Knowledge, wisdom, skills, and some of the very thought-forms by which we may avail ourselves of this treasure are handed down to us. The problem here is not analogous to rationing a given quantity of goods to a certain number of people; it is analogous to keeping a conduit open so that the spiritual accumulations of previous generations can flow unimpeded, to be enriched through understanding and application by this generation and passed on to those to come. Diminution of political liberty is comparable to the silting up of the conduit; freedom is the removal of obstructions to the flow of energy.

EDMUND A. OPITZ

IDEAS ON



LIBERTY

Thinking About Government

ONCE upon a time most people believed the world was flat, but that did not make it so. There were times when learned men believed one might discover a way to turn lead into gold or to build a perpetual motion machine. When I was a child, Mother made me wait an hour after eating before going swimming lest I get stomach cramps.

We all know better today. But did you ever wonder how many things believed today will be absurd thoughts in the future, laughed at even by children? Just for instance, what do we think is the proper role of government in our lives?

The world is a wonderful place. Mankind is on an upward course. Progress, though not constant, seems to be part of the natural order of

things. Mother nature goes on unchanged, but people are able to improve their lot. They are able to build tools to increase their effectiveness. They are able to pass both tools and the knowledge to build tools on to future generations, who in turn can improve on the knowledge and build better tools, to pass on, to be again improved. These tools and this knowledge have permitted more and more people to live more comfortable lives with less effort and less pain and less cruelty toward others.

The progress has not been continuous or uninterrupted. It has faltered. Whole continents or areas have regressed for long periods. Who among us can forget the section from our grade school history books about the "dark ages"? But while the once great have gone backward, sooner or later other areas have become new

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